What makes online political ads unacceptable? Interrogating public attitudes to inform regulatory responses

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Abstract

Online political advertising is often portrayed in a negative light, yet there is limited evidence about what exactly the public deems unacceptable about it. This paper provides new insights into public attitudes through an online survey where 1,881 respondents evaluated all political ads placed on Facebook during the 2019 UK General Election. We find that citizens do not inherently think political ads are problematic. Examining two possible regulatory responses, first, we find that compliance with existing regulatory protocols for non-political advertising is a strong predictor of political ad acceptability, suggesting a case for extending the existing regulatory regime to include political ads. We also find that people had particular concerns about the content and tone of unacceptable ads, highlighting the value of codes of conduct to promote good practice. Overall, this paper offers a nuanced account of attitudes towards online political advertising and identifies possible pathways for regulatory reform.

Keywords: online political advertising, acceptability, public attitudes, content regulation

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In recent years, the exponential growth of online political advertising has garnered much attention. Most notably within the US, the spend on digital political advertising had risen from $212 million in 2015 to $2,847 million in 2020 (Statista, 2022). Meanwhile in the UK, official spending returns showed an increase in digital advertising spend, tracing a rise from 24% of total advertising spend at the 2015 general election to 54% of total advertising spend at the 2019 general election (Dommett & Power, 2020).

As online political advertising has grown, so too have concerns about the problems of this activity. With claims of political manipulation, foreign interference and misinformation routinely associated with online political advertising at elections (Crain & Nadler, 2019; McQuate & Bergh, 2021), calls have been made for this practice to be banned (Goldman & Raicu, 2020) or subject to regulation (Furnémont & Kevin, 2020). Swift action has been taken in these regards, with tech companies including Twitter, TikTok and Amazon all banning political ads. Defending their decision, former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey asserted that 'Internet political ads present entirely new challenges to civic discourse: machine learning-based optimization of messaging and micro-targeting, unchecked misleading information, and deep fakes. All at increasing velocity, sophistication, and overwhelming scale' (October 30, 2019). These moves stand in stark contrast to the established use of political advertising offline in many countries' electoral campaigns (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006), raising questions about what exactly is unacceptable about online political advertising and what other regulatory responses, aside from bans, could be effective.

These questions are particularly pertinent in light of recent efforts by policy makers, particularly within the European Union, to shape the practice of online political advertising through legislation designed to increase transparency (European Commission, 2021a) and limit available targeting parameters (European Data Protection Supervisor, 2022). Whilst these interventions have been proclaimed to promote fair and transparent elections (European

Commission, 2021b), it has been pointed out that 'the empirical evidence base needed to guide critical changes to regulation is underdeveloped' (Guaja, 2021, p. 962). In particular, there is a critical gap in our understanding of citizens' perception of the acceptability of online political ads, meaning regulators lack empirical evidence to determine whether any proposed regulatory response will address public concern. Within this article we seek to fill this gap by generating more detailed insight into citizens' perceptions of online political advertising, specifically with a view to viable forms of regulatory response.

To provide empirical evidence, we gather data from a large-scale survey on public perceptions. Using real-world ads placed during UK elections to interrogate perceived acceptability, we aim to move beyond simple measures examining levels of concern (Electoral Commission, 2022) or public support for online political advertising bans (Auxier, 2020). Our findings show widespread acceptance of political ads across our sample population. This provides an important counterpoint to previous narratives, suggesting that all online political advertising is not inherently concerning.

We do, however, observe variations in attitudes. We aim to generate new insights into the reasons behind the variations in the attitudes of respondents, particularly in the context of ongoing efforts to regulate online political advertising (Furnémont & Kevin, 2020). Exploring explanatory factors derived from respondents' demographic attributes and societal attitudes, we show the significant roles played by gender, partisan affiliation and third-person perceptions in informing perceptions of ad acceptability. These findings suggest that attitudes towards ads are unlikely to ever be uniform, even if regulation is imposed to mitigate concerns. Recognising this, we nevertheless consider two possible regulatory responses which may address perceptions of unacceptability: extending existing regulatory oversight principles and developing a code of conduct. Examining the resonance of principles used to regulate non-political advertising we find that ads are often deemed more acceptable when they are seen to

comply with existing regulatory protocols for non-political advertising, suggesting the value of extending existing oversight systems. However, noting reticence to act in this space (Dommett & Zhu, 2022), we also consider the potential of a code of conduct - a practice currently being explored in the Netherlands (International IDEA, 2020) and Germany (Jaursch, 2020). Distilling the particular attributes of online political ads that citizens deem problematic, we reveal particular concerns about the tone and content of ads, suggesting the value of action in this space. Cumulatively these findings pave the way for a more nuanced and evidence-based discussion of online political advertising practice that has the capacity to inform government regulation, platform policies and campaigners' own practice.

Literature Review

With the rapid development of digital techniques, advertisers are able to collect and use personal data about consumers to target them with personalised ads, this phenomenon is known as online behavioural advertising (Boerman et al., 2017, p. 364). There is a longstanding body of work looking at consumer attitudes towards online behavioural advertising. Existing studies have identified perceived ad relevance and privacy concerns as the main determinants of consumers' attitudinal and behavioural responses to the ads (Kim & Huh, 2017; Ur et al., 2012).

In the field of online political advertising, existing research within and beyond academia largely focuses on public attitudes towards online targeting (Ipsos MORI, 2020), algorithmic personalisation (Kozyreva et al., 2021), data privacy (Auxier et al., 2019; Kokolakis, 2017) and automated decision making by artificial intelligence (Araujo et al., 2020; Lee, 2018). Studies show that caution towards being targeted by political ads is much more acute than being targeted by commercial ads promoting shopping, travel, entertainment, and health care, which citizens often find acceptable (Kozyreva et al., 2021). Indeed, a majority of respondents in the UK, Germany and the US think personalised political advertising is

unacceptable (Kozyreva et al., 2021; Turow et al., 2012). There is also a strong sentiment against campaigns using personal data to target political ads. Research by the Knight Foundation found that a solid majority of US respondents did not want internet companies to make personal information available to political campaigns to facilitate microtargeting (McCarthy, 2020). Similarly in the UK, the Centre for Data Ethics (CDEI) concluded from a 'public dialogue' that 65% respondents felt it was unacceptable for a political party to target undecided voters for support (2020, p. 35). These findings have led to criticism of online political advertising and there is some evidence that citizens support banning this form of content, with 54% of US respondents agreeing that no political ads should be allowed on social media platforms (Auxier, 2020).

Existing studies cumulatively suggest that political ads are held to higher standards than other forms of advertising, and yet it is not entirely clear what contributes to perceptions of unacceptability or how, if at all, online political ads could be rendered more acceptable. In particular, there is a gap in our understanding about attitudes towards specific pieces of advertising content as most existing studies tend to interrogate attitudes at a general level. In light of current interest in regulatory reform, we suggest the value of an empirical study that explores real-world ads, specifically examining how attitudes vary. For this reason, within this article we propose two research questions:

1) How acceptable are online political ads?
2) What determines the unacceptability of online political ads?

Posing these two questions, we consider the viability of proposed regulatory interventions, specifically testing the value of extending the existing system regulatory oversight for non-political ads and the possible content of a code of conduct for political advertising.

Empirical Expectations: Testing demographic and attitudinal factors

As outlined above, previous research indicates a generally negative public attitude towards political advertising, particularly with respect to targeting. Moreover, it is commonly assumed that there are differences among the public based on attitudes or demographic characteristics, regarding the acceptability of online political advertising. The extent to which these differences are genuine poses a challenge to the prospect of regulatory interventions to mitigate perceptions of acceptability.

Instead of relying on abstract attitudes towards political advertising in general, our approach is to collect responses to specific, real-world online political ads and analyse the impact of demographic and attitudinal factors on judgments of these ads. Our analysis is supported by formal preregistration of hypotheses and data analyses practices (OSF pre-registration link: https://osf.io/y9kjg/?view_only=609cd46aab534e4c866c16b3ef29c510). Preregistration ensures that confirmatory versus exploratory analyses are marked correctly as such, and supports severe tests of statistical significance. It also provides an opportunity for formal power analysis to ensure that sample sizes are adequate to detect the effect sizes of interest (see Stafford et al., 2020 for an extended discussion of statistical power). Below, we will go through the hypotheses that we are committed to testing as part of this plan, consisting of seven expectations that are based on insights from the existing literature.

First, we consider the possibility that citizens may dislike political ads in general, and hence are likely to judge this form of content to be unacceptable. As suggested by Pew's findings (2020), there is widespread support for banning political ads on social media, suggesting that respondents may view ads as unacceptable by their sheer presence. We therefore hypothesise that ads seen to be 'political' are more likely to be deemed unacceptable than non-political ads.

Hypothesis 1: Ads deemed to be 'political' are more likely than others to be perceived as unacceptable.

Second, we expect that demographic attributes will have an impact on perceptions of ad acceptability. Previous research has shown age, ethnicity and education to drive variations in attitudes. Turow et al. (2012), for example, found that older people were less accepting of targeted political ads than younger people, women were less accepting of politically tailored ads than men, Blacks and Hispanics were less concerned with politically tailored ads than whites and other ethnic groups, and those with higher education tended to be more critical about this tactic. This leads us to hypothesise on the age factor and include gender, education and minority status as control variables.

Hypothesis 2: Older people are more likely than younger people to find online political ads unacceptable.

Third, we build on existing research looking at public trust. Previous research has shown levels of trust to be an important moderator in predicting public attitudes, with Otto and Maier (2016), for example, finding that general trust and attitudes affect views of politicians and the media (see also Matthes, 2013). Studies have identified that social and interpersonal trust have an important effect on the development of trust in media, with people exhibiting high levels of political trust more willing to be exposed to political news and get involved in politics (Avery, 2009; Jackob, 2012; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). Similarly, individuals' attitudes of online targeting were found to be often shaped by their existing views about the wider world, in particular, trust in organisations and institutions (Ipsos MORI, 2020). If people do not trust platform companies or the government to perform in their best interests, we expect that they have unfavourable views of political ads appearing on their Facebook feed. Accordingly, we hypothesise that citizens with lower levels of trust in people, political institutions and Facebook will view ads to be less acceptable.

Hypothesis 3: Those with less trust in people are more likely than others to find ads unacceptable.

Hypothesis 4: Those with less political trust are more likely than others to find ads unacceptable.

Hypothesis 5: Those with less trust in Facebook are more likely than others to find ads unacceptable.

The third-person perception is a theory that depicts a self-other asymmetry in perceptions about presumed media influences, suggesting individuals tend to think that media effects are stronger on others than on themselves (Davison, 1983). Existing studies have demonstrated that the perceptual gap in media effects is robust across various forms of media content (David et al., 2004; Sun et al., 2008). Individuals tend to develop higher levels of third-person perception when encountering socially undesirable media content such as fake news and violent messages (Jang & Kim, 2018). In these circumstances, higher third-person perceptions would lead to more support for intervention and regulation. Previous research exploring this idea in the context of advertising has found respondents tend to believe that others are more influenced than themselves by undesirable media content such as negative political advertising (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Wei & Golan, 2014). For this reason, we hypothesise that those who report a stronger third-person perception will view ads as more unacceptable.

Hypothesis 6: Those with stronger third-person perceptions are more likely than others to find ads unacceptable.

Finally, we expect that partisan identity will play an important mediating role in determining perceptions of specific ads. Existing studies have shown a strong presence of partisan motivated reasoning, suggesting that individuals are driven by their partisan motives when evaluating political information (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Goal oriented individuals are often inclined to arrive at a conclusion that is in line with their partisan affiliation. When given party

cues (e.g., a piece of information that is sponsored by a political party), individuals are found to rely on heuristic cognitive processing that would urge them to endorse the stance of their party (Petersen et al., 2013). Baum et al., (2021) for example, have shown how partisan cues drive attitude towards political advertising, finding that partisan self-interest plays an important role in predicting people's support for the regulation of targeted political advertising. As such, we expect that the congruence between a respondent's own partisan views and the partisan source of an ad will affect perceived acceptability.

Hypothesis 7: Ads from a partisan source that is congruent with a respondent's own party affiliation are more likely to be viewed as acceptable than ads from incongruent partisan sources.

Identifying potential regulatory responses: Testing ad level attributes

Having interrogated demographic and attitudinal explanations for variation, we turn to consider two proposed avenues for regulatory reform. First, we engage with the proposal to extend existing systems of regulatory oversight to online political advertising. Within the UK, there is an established mechanism for the regulation of non-political advertising outlined by the Advertising Standards Authority's Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP), which specifies a need for commercial advertising to be 'legal, decent, honest and truthful' (ASA CAP Code Preface[1]). At present these principles are not applied to the regulation of political ads online or offline. Interrogating perceptions of unacceptability, we theorise that a perceived violation of these existing regulatory standards may drive perceptions of unacceptability, suggesting the value of extending existing regulations to apply online. To test this idea, we outline the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 8: Ads that are rated with lower scores on the 'legal, decent, honest and truthful' protocol are more likely to be viewed as unacceptable.

This data allows us to consider the potential value of extending existing regulatory principles to online political ads. And yet, we note the current reticence towards such activities from stakeholders within this space (Dommett & Zhu, 2022). For this reason, we consider a further possible response: the development of a code of conduct. This proposal has been made not only by the UK Parliament (House of Lords, 2020) but also by lobby groups (e.g., Reform Political Advertising) active within this space and yet there has been limited detail about the extent to which it is possible to identify 'unacceptable' practices within ads or to specify what practices need to be avoided. Rather than posing a specific hypothesis, we conduct an exploratory analysis to generate more insight, specifically asking respondents to isolate the particular attributes of specific ads that affect ad acceptability. Adopting this approach, we consider four possible explanations: First, mirroring our hypotheses above, we examine attitudinal responses, specifically considering the idea that a respondent simply may dislike the source, message or nature of political ads, affecting perceptions of unacceptability. Second, we focus on the potential for ads to be seen to have 'poor content'. Noting widespread coverage of claims around misinformation and fake news within political advertising, concerns around manipulation, harmful or unconstructive messaging, and poor argumentation (Crain & Nadler, 2019; McQuate & Bergh, 2021), we examine whether concerns about content are selected in accounting for perception of unacceptability. Third, and related to this point, we note specific concerns voiced around the emotional tone of online political advertising. Whilst political advertising in general is often associated with negative messaging (Borah et al., 2018), particular concerns have been voiced about the potential for online advertising to deploy particularly sensationalised emotional tones in order to elicit a response from an audience and drive engagement (Gruning & Schubert, 2021). We therefore explore whether the emotional tone of an advert affects perceptions of unacceptability. Finally, and recognising concerns voiced in particular within the EU context (Lomas, 2021), we consider the potential for an

absence of transparency to affect the acceptability of political ads. In particular, we explore whether a lack of information about the source of an advert, the financial backer, the selected targeting criteria, the data source used to target an advert, or content verification is pertinent. Through this analysis we consider the particular attributes of online political advertising that a code of conduct could fruitfully address.

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we offer one of the first studies to examine the UK context, providing new insights into the field beyond the prevailing US-centric narrative. Specifically, we consider public attitudes towards ads placed during the 2019 general election, where there was extensive coverage of concerning digital campaigning practices, including a lack of transparency and misinformation (Dommett & Power, 2020).

To generate stimuli, we drew upon the Facebook advertising archive (Edelson et al., 2018). Being one of the most dominant social media platforms in the UK, Facebook reported 44 million registered accounts in December 2019, with 71% of UK adults actively using the platform (Business Times, 2020). Unlike other dominant platforms (such as TikTok),[2] Facebook provides an extensive political advertising archive, allowing analysis of political content placed on the platform. Drawing upon this resource, we used the Ad Library API, which allows customised keyword search of ads stored in the Library, to filter ads using a curated list of political actors. Specifically, we gathered ads placed by parties, political leaders, and 'satellite campaign groups' (Dommett & Temple, 2018)[3] in the 2019 UK general election between 6th November and 12th December 2019. This resulted in a total of 2,506 unique ads[4] placed by our selected accounts. Specifically, we identified 1,022 ads placed by 11 political parties, 344 ads placed by 9 party leaders, and 1,140 ads placed by 25 satellite campaigners. Based on the type of Facebook accounts that fielded ads, we classified all 2,506 ads into four

categories – Labour source, Conservative source, other party source, and satellite source including pro-Labour, pro-Conservative, anti-Labour, anti-Conservative, and anti-SNP[5] depending on their political motives (see Appendix Table A1 for the names of the advertising accounts). To our best knowledge, this is the first study examining public attitudes using a large and representative population of ads.

Having identified all ads placed by our selected accounts during this period, we fielded an online survey on Prolific. Compared with other crowdsourcing platforms such as MTurk, Prolific has proven to be able to provide high quality data for online behavioural research in terms of their participants' ability to devote their attention to tasks, understand instructions, provide truthful and accurate responses that are internally consistent and reliable (Peer et al., 2021). We collected data from 1,881[6] individuals on August 20th, 2022. Eligible participants were UK nationals, at least 18 years old, who could use tablets or desktop computers to take part in the study. For every respondent, the survey randomly selected four out of 2,506 ads to display. Ads were sampled at random without replacement, meaning that every respondent was expected to see four unique ads and the chance of a respondent seeing a repeated ad was zero[7]. In total, this resulted in 7,228 responses to our sample of ads. Within this article, we focus on reporting ad level responses, which were calculated by either determining the average response to a single ad, or by listing all relevant attributes selected in relation to a specific ad.[8]

The survey started with each participant being shown a screenshot of an ad (see examples in Figure 1) and instructed to answer eight questions relating to it. This process was then repeated three times with a new ad shown and the same questions asked. The survey later asked questions about demographics, political affiliation, social trust, and views on politics and democracy. There are 48 questions in total, mainly in the forms of multiple choice (see full questionnaire in the Online Appendix).

[Figure 1 around here.]

To ensure the quality of data, we included two attention checks and excluded those who failed either (n=70). We also removed those who weren't able to load the ad images (n=4), this left us with a sample of 1,807 participants who responded to 2,375 unique ads[9].

Representativeness

The age of our respondents ranges from 18 to 90, with an average of 43. There are slightly more female (54%) than male (46%) participants. Our data includes 38.8% Labour supporters, 19.7% Conservative supporters and 23.3% other party (Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, UKIP, Green Party British National Party, and Reform UK) supporters. In comparison, the vote share in the 2019 General Election shows that Labour had 32.1% votes, the Conservative party had 43.6%, and other parties had 21.4% (Uberoi et al., 2020). Hence, it's important to acknowledge that Conservative supporters are underrepresented in our sample. This might be explained by the 'shy Tory' phenomenon that many Conservatives do not reveal their true voting intentions to pollsters (Morucci & Symington, 2015).

Findings

To address our first research question, we begin by examining respondents' views about the acceptability of the online political ads fielded at the 2019 general election. Looking at ad level acceptability, we find that the average ad acceptability score is 4.04 on a 1-6 scale, meaning that our pool of ads are considered 'slightly acceptable' on average (Figure 2). Indeed within our dataset, 1,596 ads were judged on average to be acceptable. Specifically, we found that 2,126 ads (89.5%) were deemed by at least one respondent to be acceptable, whilst 137 ads were deemed by *all* respondents to be 'definitely acceptable'. Meanwhile, 1,507 ads (63.5%) were judged by at least one respondent to be unacceptable, although just 40 ads were deemed by *all* their viewers as 'definitely unacceptable'. Our data therefore shows that a majority of

these political ads are considered acceptable, although there is evidence that not all respondents viewed ads in the same way when it came to acceptability.

[Figure 2 around here.]

Analysing based on the sources of the ads (see Table 1), on a scale between 1 and 6, we find that ads placed by the Labour Party received the highest score of 4.61, suggesting that at the aggregate level Labour ads are considered moderately acceptable. The ads placed by the Conservatives received the lowest score of 3.70, meaning their ads are considered slightly acceptable on average. In contrast, ads placed by other parties (i.e. Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, UKIP, Green Party, British National Party, and Reform UK) were scored at 4.47, which falls in between slightly acceptable and moderately acceptable. We also looked at ads for satellite groups that are partisan leaning with a particular partisan agenda. Amongst these, we find that ads placed by pro-Labour accounts received the highest acceptability score of 4.18, whilst ads placed by pro-Conservative accounts received the lowest score of 3.42.

Turning to look at data on whether our ads were perceived to be political, after seeing each ad, respondents were asked whether they thought the ad was 'political'. Our descriptive data shows that 2.4% ads (58 out of 2,375 ads) were rated by all their viewers as not clearly being political or not sure if it was political. Given that all ads were obtained from the Facebook Ad Library where they were categorised under 'Issues, elections or politics', it is perhaps unsurprising that the vast majority were viewed by respondents as political. However, we also found that 19.7% ads (467 out of 2,375 ads) were rated by at least one viewer as not clearly being political or not sure if it was political. This raises some questions about the degree to which Facebook's classificatory enforcement reflects a commonly held definition of online political advertising (Crain & Nadler, 2019; Le Pochat et al., 2022; Sosnovik & Goga, 2021).

[Table 1 around here.]

Our initial findings therefore reveal some variation in how ads are viewed, but overall we find high acceptability of the online political ads within our sample. In many ways this finding may be reassuring to regulators as it suggests that much practice is deemed acceptable. And yet there remains interest in regulation, making it important to explore drivers for this variation and possible responses. To these ends, we first turn to examine the relevance of respondents' demographic and attitudinal as drivers of advert perceptions.

For regression analysis, we transformed our original data from wide shape into long shape. By reshaping the data into a stacked structure (see van der Ejik, 2018 for analytical reference), our unit of analysis shifts from individual respondents to their responses, whilst multiple measurements (e.g. on ad acceptability) are combined into a single variable that allows regression analysis. To test our hypotheses, we use a block-recursive structure. Table 2 presents six regression models, with the first three testing different independent variables, an interaction model and a satellite model testing partisan effects, and an overall model with all effects estimated simultaneously.

To test whether an ad being 'political' affects its perceived acceptability (H1), we performed a multivariate regression in Model 1 of Table 2. The dependent variable is ad acceptability based on whether a respondent thinks an ad is acceptable, with a score ranging from 1 'definitely unacceptable' to 6 'definitely acceptable'. The independent variable is whether an ad is deemed as 'political'. This variable is coded binary with those being seen as clearly political as 1 and other two categories (not clear/not sure) as 0. We also included the demographic factors in the regression analysis to test their effect on ad acceptability. In Model 1, we find that the ads deemed 'clearly political' were more likely than those viewed as 'not political' or 'not sure about being political' to be judged acceptable. The relationship is positive, strong and statistically significant (direct effect=0.320, $p<0.001$), rejecting our first

hypothesis. This result suggests that people do not think *political* ads are inherently unacceptable or problematic.

Turning to H2, we expected that older people would view ads to be less acceptable, but in Model 1, there is no significant effect of age on acceptability (direct effect=0.0002, p=0.907), rejecting H2. In the overall model, the effect of age is also very weak. Looking at other similar demographic variables we found that gender is an important factor in predicting ad acceptability. In other words, men are more likely than women to find online political ads acceptable. This suggests that older people are not necessarily less accepting of ads than younger people. Beyond this demographic attribute, we also find that one's educational attainment and minority status do not have any significant effect on perceptions of ad acceptability. Meanwhile, respondents who are well informed of party politics and value living in a democracy are significantly more likely than their counterparts to find online political ads acceptable. The R^2 in Model 1, however, shows that the 'political' factor and demographics only account for 2.50% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Next, in line with our pre-registration plan, we examine the role of societal attitudes on ad acceptability, testing H3-H6. In Model 2 of Table 2, the independent variables include *trust in people*, *political trust*, *trust in Facebook*, and *third-person perception,* with demographic factors as controls. The results show positive effects from levels of trust, however, these relationships are not statistically significant, offering limited support for H3-H5. We find that higher third-person perception is correlated with lower ad acceptability (H6), meaning that those who think other people are more affected by political content than themselves are less likely to find online political ads acceptable. The relationship is negative and statistically significant (direct effect=-0.011, p=0.020), offering support for H6. Societal factors altogether, however, contribute very little to the total explained variance (R^2=2.90%) in Model 2, exhibiting very little explanatory power.

To explore the relative effect of partisan motivated reasoning (H7), we tested the interaction effects between participant partisan identification and the partisan source of the ad. This allowed us to cross examine how a partisan respondent views an ad from a congruent or incongruent partisan source. In the Interaction Model of Table 2, we find that Conservative supporters are significantly more likely than others to agree that an ad placed by the Conservative party is acceptable. Both the Labour and Conservative supporters tend to find ads placed by the opposite party unacceptable. For the ads placed by satellite sources, in the Satellite Model we find that Conservative supporters tend to find pro-Labour and anti-Conservative ads less acceptable, but surprisingly they also find pro-Conservative ads less acceptable[10] than others. The Labour supporters are more likely than others to find pro-Labour and anti-Conservative ads acceptable, but these results are not statistically significant. These findings from satellite accounts therefore show partial support for H8 that the partisan source of an ad to some extent has an impact on party supporters' view of ad acceptability.

Cumulatively these findings suggest that respondents' demographic and attitudinal attributes exert an effect on perceptions of acceptability, although not always in line with expectations (a point we return to below). Whilst this finding suggests that, even with regulation, there is likely to be variation in individuals' response to ads, we nevertheless explore the potential for regulatory interventions to address unacceptable practices. To do so, we consider the potential for an extension of existing regulatory norms to affect judgements of acceptability, and we explore the specific traits of advertising that explain unacceptability and that could form the basis for a new code of conduct for online political advertising.

[Table 2 around here.]

Regulatory choice 1: Testing existing norms

First, we consider the proposal to expand existing regulatory principles to online political advertising. To do so, we assess the degree to which a perception that an ad violates existing

regulatory standards informs perceptions of acceptability (H8). In response to each ad, we asked respondents to score the degree to which they felt ads accorded with the regulatory standards (legal, decent, honest and truthful) applied to non-political advertising. In Model 3 of Table 2, we present a regression model using respondents' judgement of these principles to predict ad acceptability. The results show that ads that are more positively perceived as being legal, decent, honest, and truthful are significantly more likely to be considered acceptable than those not perceived to strongly exhibit these attributes, all else being equal. In particular, decency stands out with the strongest effect on ads acceptability rating (direct effect=0.471, $p<0.001$). As such, the results support H8, providing evidence that there is grounds to extend existing regulatory principles to political advertising. Indeed, it is worth noting that regulatory norms add significantly stronger explanatory power than any other factors to the regression model (R^2=76.90%).

In the overall model, we estimate all independent variables simultaneously. Given the findings on the effect of demographic factors discussed above, we find that even when all these factors are assessed in a single model, the effects of regulatory norms stay robust and significant, suggesting that regulation using existing norms is likely to be able to exert an impact. The results also indicate that other societal factors and the 'political' factor mainly function as a mediator for other variables included in the model.

Regulatory choice 2: Code of conduct principles

Turning next to consider proposals for a code of conduct, we perform exploratory analysis of the reasons selected by respondents to explain perceptions of acceptability. In our survey, when a respondent indicated that they believed an ad was unacceptable, they were asked to select the top 3 explanations from a list of 28 reasons (plus a free text option).[11] For our analysis, we classified these 28 items into four categories to explain unacceptability: attitude, content, tone,

and transparency. Reporting this data, we focus on the codes assigned to individual ads. It is important to keep in mind that respondents could only select up to 3 codes, hence these figures reveal the most important codes selected by respondents rather than all possible codes that accounted for their judgement.

Out of the 2,375 unique ads analysed, we found that 1,507 (63.5%) ads were deemed unacceptable by at least one viewer, hence our analysis concentrates on these 1,507 ads. Upon analysing the prominence of our four categories, we found that content issues were the most frequently cited reason for unacceptability (Figure 3). Of the 1,507 unacceptable ads, 1,177 (78.1%) were found to exhibit at least one content problem. Looking at the specific explanation that appeared under the *content* heading, we find that 571 (37.9%) of our unacceptable ads were indicated by at least one viewer to be 'manipulative' and 483 (32.1%) ads were considered 'misleading', making them the most commonly selected reasons overall. The least cited reason under *content* was concerns about the harmful ad content (4.2%). For *tone*, we find that the top two reasons selected were 'fear-mongering' (29.6%) and 'divisive' (22.2%), which ranked the fourth and seventh most cited reasons amongst all. We also observed that *attitude* was commonly selected, accounting for the third, fifth, sixth and eighth most common reasons which were 'I dislike all political ads' (30.0%), 'I don't agree with this advert' (23.2%), 'political ads can never be trusted' (23.1%), and 'I dislike this political group/person' (22.0%). Interestingly, *transparency* issues were not featured in the top 10 most selected reasons, as only 442 (29.3%) ads were cited as having transparency issues, suggesting that this is not a common concern amongst the public.

[Figure 3 around here.]

It is worth noting that we do not claim or expect this list of 28 reasons under four categories to be completely exhaustive in accounting for ad unacceptability. Acknowledging this concern, we provided a free text box labelled 'Other' for respondents to give reasons (for selecting unacceptability) that weren't already listed. In total, 63 ads were identified as unacceptable under 'Other' reasons and there were 39 text entries for elaboration (see details in Appendix Table A5). Given that responses under 'Other' only constitute 4.2% of unacceptable ads and its content does not form a distinct reason or category, we can be assured that our designed metrics are robust in terms of validity and comprehensiveness.

Although not reported here - given our focus on unacceptability - we also analysed responses from individuals who found ads acceptable (Appendix Table A4). Here we observed that *attitude* (75.2%) and *content* (73.6%) were the most frequently cited reasons for acceptability. Yet we found that *transparency* (66.1%) and *tone* (65%) were also commonly selected. This finding on transparency is particularly notable, given how little these reasons were selected for explaining unacceptability, suggesting that it may be significant in driving acceptability perceptions, if not accounting for perceptions of unacceptability.

Discussion

As one of the first studies to explore public perceptions of online political advertising, our paper makes an important contribution to the literature by examining perceptions of acceptability and why political ads are judged differently from their commercial counterparts. Contrary to prevailing narratives around the problematic nature of political ads, we found that, in general, responses to political ads did not indicate that they were unacceptable. Indeed, we found that the average score for an advert was 4.04 on a 6-point scale, with 1,596 ads being judged as acceptable on average. Interrogating the reasons for these judgments of acceptability, we found that the most commonly selected reason was that 'this topic is acceptable for political

campaigning' (see Appendix Table A4). This finding offers an important counterpoint to the existing narrative around online political advertising and suggests that ads are being used in ways that are broadly seen as acceptable by the public. It is possible that this finding reflects the difference in question formulation, with more concern about online political ads as an abstract concern compared to specific examples of real-world practice. However, further analysis is needed to verify this idea.

Despite this finding, we note that perceptions of unacceptability do exist. Our data shows that respondents did not always agree about the acceptability of each specific piece of content. Indeed, looking at individual responses to specific ads, we found that 1,507 ads (63.5%) were judged by at least one respondent to be unacceptable. Although attitudes in general are therefore favourable, we find that there are grounds for evidence of concern.

To interrogate the reasons for these varied judgements of acceptability, we first explored demographic and attitudinal factors to examine whether specific types of respondents or those holding particular attitudes viewed ads to be less acceptable. In contrast to previous work that has suggested the influence of age to affect attitudes toward digital phenomena, we did not find older people to be more likely to view an ad as unacceptable. We did, however, find that gender predicts perceived acceptability, as men are more likely than women to find online political ads acceptable. We also found a partisan effect, with Labour supporters significantly more likely than others to find online political ads acceptable. In particular, our results show that ads from a partisan source that is congruent with a respondent's own partisan views are more likely to be viewed as acceptable (e.g., Conservative voters presented with ads placed by Conservative sources), whilst ads from incongruent partisan sources are more likely to be seen as unacceptable (e.g., Labour supporters presented with ads placed by Conservative sources). Echoing the established academic theory on opinion formation based on partisan

motivated reasoning (Bolsen et al., 2014; Taber & Lodge, 2016), our findings reveal that the source of a political ad, in certain situations, has an impact on the perceptions of online political advertising acceptability (see also Baum et al., 2021). Individuals tend to interpret political information in a way that aligns with their partisan interest, but it is important to note that we didn't find consistent evidence of this effect. Our findings accordingly partially support conclusions from pre-existing studies, but the lack of an age effect is notable. Whilst we cannot fully explain this outcome, it may be that this reflects something particular about online political advertising. Whilst many other studies of new technological practices are examining attitudes towards novel or unfamiliar practices (such as AI), our study explores a longstanding practice of political messaging which has precedent offline in the form of billboard advertising and leaflets. This prior activity may render this activity more familiar and hence acceptable across age brackets, meaning we do not see the usual caution towards new technologies by older respondents that is found in other research.

Turning to social attitudes, we did not find that those with lower levels of social trust, political trust, or trust in Facebook report ads to be less acceptable. Contrary to our prediction, these factors turned out to have a very small, even negligible effect on one's perception of ad acceptability. This shows that despite social and political trust being important for media effects, they barely affect people's perception about political ads. In our case, other factors such as regulatory norms and partisanship are more important. And yet, we did find that those reporting a stronger third-person perception are more likely than others to find ads unacceptable. This means that citizens who are more concerned about the impact of ads on others (as opposed to themselves) are more likely to deem ads unacceptable. This raises interesting questions about the standards that respondents apply to assessments of acceptability. It could be that people's judgments reflect anticipations about how others may be affected by

stimulus (as opposed to themselves) such as manipulative, fearmongering, and misleading content, hence causing higher standards to be imposed.

Building on and extending this analysis, we engaged directly with two proposals for regulation designed to address unacceptable ads. First we considered proposals to extend existing regulatory principles to online political ads by asking whether perceptions of the violation of current regulatory standards affected perceptions of acceptability. We found that ads which appear to violate the basis of existing regulatory standards (being legal, decent, truthful and honest) are more likely to be deemed unacceptable. This supports the idea of extending existing regulatory oversight to political ads, adding weight to calls for regulators to extend the system of commercial advertising oversight to the regulation of online political ads.

In addition, we engaged with proposals to establish a code of conduct, conducting an exploratory analysis to see whether particular common attributes of unacceptable ads emerged that could be targeted by such action. Exploring four possible factors we found that the content of political ads, and specifically perceptions of 'manipulative' or 'misleading' content often accounted for this response. It was also the case that explanations classified as tone and attitude were commonly selected, with ads described as unacceptable because they were 'fear-mongering' and 'divisive'. These findings suggest that the attributes of an ad can have implications for acceptability, suggesting the possibility of designing codes of conduct that seek to mitigate unacceptable practices. In recommending such as response, our findings are particularly interesting as they suggest that such codes should not focus solely on efforts to maximise transparency - in line with much recent activity (European Commission, 2022) - but should also address the question of how to avoid making manipulative, misleading, inaccurate ads with emotive, fear-mongering or divisive content. This is not to say that transparency efforts by governments and platforms are erroneous. It was notable within respondents'

explanations for ad acceptability that transparency featured highly as a reason for an advert being deemed acceptable (with two of the transparency items – 'It is clear who placed this advert' and 'It is clear who paid for this advert' – making the top 3 most cited reasons for ad acceptability). This suggests that transparency can drive positive perceptions of ads and is therefore an important consideration, but in efforts to mitigate perceptions of unacceptable practice our findings indicate that alone they will be insufficient.

In drawing these conclusions, our findings cumulatively suggest support for these regulatory responses but our demographic and attitudinal findings also suggest that some aspects of public perception are beyond advertisers' own control. Speaking to our findings around the impact of partisan identification, there is little that an advertiser can do if the respondent simply dislikes the political group or person, nor if they simply do not trust political ads. As such, our findings suggest that campaigners themselves may not be able to eradicate the perception that an ad is unacceptable, but they may be able to reduce the propensity of such judgements by altering their practice.

Limitations

Our findings need to be interpreted with certain limitations in mind. In this study, we exclusively analysed election period ads from the Facebook ad library. Whilst Facebook is currently the most dominant social media platform for advertisers, it is possible that political advertising on other platforms or outside the election period might employ different strategies. Therefore, user perceptions could differ depending on the context. Future research should explore public attitudes towards political advertising on other online platforms and its implications for policy-making.

The Facebook ad archive also has its own limitations. For example, scholars find Facebook's current enforcement lacks precision, with a considerable portion of political ads

not being captured by the platform and categorised under 'ads about social issues, elections or politics', whilst non-political ads may also be enlisted (Le Pochat et al., 2022; Sosnovik & Goga, 2021). For our study, we could only utilise the ads being identified and archived in the ad library. It is outside the scope of our study to analyse political ads that were disseminated on Facebook but evaded the platform's detection.

Methodologically, we utilised random selection from the population of ads to ensure that each respondent viewed four unique ads and that each ad was rated an average of three times by different viewers. This method ensured that each respondent had the same amount of tasks, and each ad from the population was evaluated more or less equally. However, it is worth noting that algorithmic personalization and targeting techniques, which are widely used in online advertising practices, can result in vastly different online experiences for users depending on their sociodemographics and the electoral competitiveness in their constituency. For example, a conservative supporter might see a different set of ads on their Facebook feed compared to a Labour supporter. We acknowledge that the random nature of exposure that we imposed may not match a user's real-life experience, and this may compromise the external validity of this study to some extent.

Conclusion

In this paper, we aim to examine public attitudes towards online political advertising in detail, specifically seeking to determine what renders this form of political advertising unacceptable. Addressing the gap in existing empirical research, our analysis shows that, contrary to many prevailing narratives, online political ads are often deemed acceptable. However, perceptions vary according to demographic and attitudinal traits, revealing important nuances in how different groups of citizens view this form of content. Engaging with proposals for regulation in this area, we explored two proposals to generate evidence-based insights. In regards to calls

to extend existing systems of regulatory oversight, we find that ads seen to violate existing regulatory norms are deemed more unacceptable, suggesting the potential value of extending existing regulatory principles to online political advertising. Additionally, through exploratory analysis to investigate proposals for creating codes of political advertising conduct, we found that judgements of unacceptability are often attributed to issues of content such as manipulative, misleading, fear-mongering and divisive content. These findings suggest the value of a code of conduct designed to guide practitioners in avoiding the production of unacceptable types of content.

These findings are significant for current debates about online political advertising, revealing hitherto lacking nuance in empirical evidence. They also have direct relevance to policy making debates, showing that current efforts to increase transparency alone are unlikely to directly address the problems perceived by voters with this form of advertising. Instead, it appears there is value in extending the existing regulatory regime and building on existing efforts to develop codes of conduct that tackle the production of unacceptable content.

Notes

1. See: https://www.asa.org.uk/type/non_broadcast/code_folder/preface.html

2. It should be noted TikTok is currently testing a new API to facilitate academic research on the platform.

3. These groups were identified from records maintained by the UK Electoral Commission, including a list of registered political parties and non-party campaigners who 'campaign in the run up to elections but do not stand as political parties or candidates' (Electoral Commission ND).

4. All the urls of the ads are saved in a repository that will be released upon publication.

5. We do not analyse 'anti-SNP' data in the paper. These headings captured the full spectrum of positions held by our selected groups, meaning we did not, for example, observe pro or anti-Green party groups in our sample.

6. Each participant was assigned four ads. Ads were sampled at random without replacement, from a total of 2,506 ads. Due to random variation, some ads would be seen 0 times and some would be seen multiple times. Assuming the average ad viewership is 3, we decided our sample size by calculating n = 2,506*3 /4 = 1,880.

7. Having checked the data, we can confirm that all respondents in our analysis were shown four unique ads. The average viewership per ad was 3.04.

8. In taking this approach, we draw attention to the fact that each ad could potentially be rated a different number of times and hence the average figure was not calculated from a consistent number of responses.

9. See Appendix Table A2 for the demographic summaries of the survey respondents and Appendix Table A3 for a summary of variable coding.

10. Looking into these ads, it turns out these are 'tactical vote' ads (placed by pro-tory satellite accounts) that Conservative supporters find unacceptable.

11. Respondents were also asked to select from a similar list of ‘acceptable’ reasons if answering that the ad was acceptable.

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Table 1. Ad level acceptability score based on ad sources and respondents' party affiliation

Ad source	Number of unique ads	Average acceptability score
Labour source	231	4.61
Conservative source	557	3.70
Other party source	500	4.47
Satellite source (Pro-Labour)	282	4.18
Satellite source (Pro-Conservative)	32	3.42
Satellite source (Anti-Labour)	214	3.49
Satellite source (Anti-Conservative)	555	3.93
Satellite source (Anti-SNP)	4	3.68
Total	2,375	4.04

Table 2. Multivariate regressions of demographic, societal and regulatory factors on ad acceptability

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Interaction Model	Satellite Model	Overall Model
ads being clearly 'political'	0.320*** (0.075)				0.046 (0.038)	0.051 (0.039)
Societal factors						
Trust in people		0.042 (0.022)			0.001 (0.010)	0.001 (0.010)
Political trust		0.042 (0.026)			-0.015 (0.012)	-0.014 (0.012)
Trust in Facebook		0.040 (0.021)			0.004 (0.010)	0.004 (0.010)
Third-person perception		-0.011* (0.005)			-0.005* (0.002)	-0.005* (0.002)
Regulatory norms						
Legal			0.147*** (0.013)	0.153*** (0.013)	0.146*** (0.013)	0.152*** (0.013)
Decent			0.471*** (0.016)	0.467*** (0.016)	0.468*** (0.016)	0.463*** (0.016)
Honest			0.142*** (0.022)	0.136*** (0.022)	0.142*** (0.022)	0.138*** (0.022)
Truthful			0.215*** (0.021)	0.209*** (0.021)	0.213*** (0.021)	0.206*** (0.021)
Controls						
Age	0.0002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.009)
Gender	0.159** (0.050)	0.164** (0.050)	0.083** (0.025)	0.082** (0.024)	0.088*** (0.025)	0.087*** (0.024)
Education	-0.013 (0.026)	-0.015 (0.026)	-0.019 (0.013)	-0.019* (0.013)	-0.018 (0.013)	-0.019 (0.013)
Minority	0.001 (0.012)	0.008 (0.013)	0.003 (0.006)	0.002 (0.006)	0.002 (0.006)	0.002 (0.006)
Party knowledge	0.077*** (0.018)	0.076*** (0.018)	0.009 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)
Democracy	0.066** (0.020)	0.063** (0.021)	-0.0002 (0.010)	0.001 (0.010)	0.002 (0.010)	0.003 (0.010)
Conservative supporters x Conservative ad source				0.263*** (0.067)		0.221** (0.079)

Labour supporters x Labour ad source				-0.076 (0.061)		-0.085 (0.068)
Conservative supporters x Labour ad source				-0.074 (0.094)		-0.116 (0.102)
Labour supporters x Conservative ad source				-0.125* (0.058)		-0.137* (0.066)
Conservative ad source				-0.052* (0.042)		-0.078 (0.048)
Labour ad source				0.101* (0.047)		0.081 (0.054)
Conservative supporters x Pro-Conservative Satellite					-0.461* (0.181)	-0.383* (0.182)
Conservative supporters x Anti-Labour Satellite					-0.015 (0.112)	0.063 (0.119)
Labour supporters x Pro-Labour Satellite					0.078 (0.070)	0.010 (0.075)
Labour supporters x Anti-Conservative Satellite					0.056 (0.053)	-0.015 (0.060)
Conservative supporters x Anti-Conservative Satellite					-0.142* (0.072)	-0.079 (0.084)
Conservative supporters x Pro-Labour Satellite					-0.184* (0.093)	-0.119 (0.099)
Labour supporters x Anti-Labour Satellite					0.040 (0.081)	-0.037 (0.086)
Labour supporters x Pro-Conservative Satellite					-0.030 (0.158)	-0.111 (0.161)
Satellite (Anti-Labour) ad source					-0.128* (0.058)	-0.152* (0.062)
Satellite (Anti-Conservative) ad source					0.013 (0.039)	-0.006 (0.045)
Satellite (Pro-Labour) ad source					0.029 (0.054)	0.012 (0.057)
Satellite (Pro-Conservative) ad source					-0.039 (0.095)	-0.058 (0.098)
Conservative supporters	-0.030 (0.071)	-0.100 (0.072)	-0.008 (0.035)	-0.065 (0.043)	0.055 (0.042)	-0.018 (0.060)
Labour supporters	0.206*** (0.053)	0.175** (0.053)	0.039 (0.026)	0.079** (0.030)	0.013 (0.031)	0.087* (0.043)
Constant	2.894*** (0.160)	2.954*** (0.170)	0.441*** (0.082)	0.473*** (0.083)	0.468*** (0.099)	0.510*** (0.102)
R^2 (%)	2.50%	2.90%	76.90%	77.08%	77.08%	77.22%

Note: Cells represent unstandardized coefficients and standard errors of linear regression models for independent variables toward ad acceptability. Standard errors are clustered at the level of the respondent. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Figure 1. Examples of screenshots displayed in the survey

Figure 2. Ad level average acceptability rating

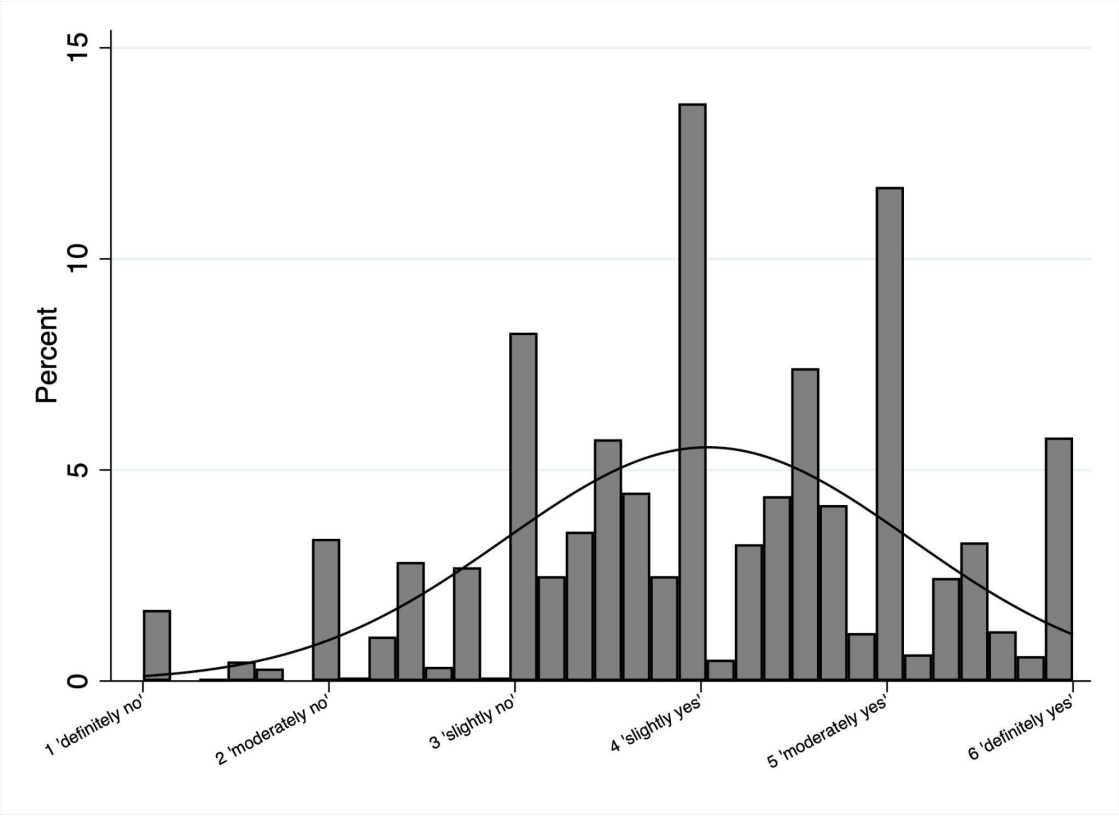
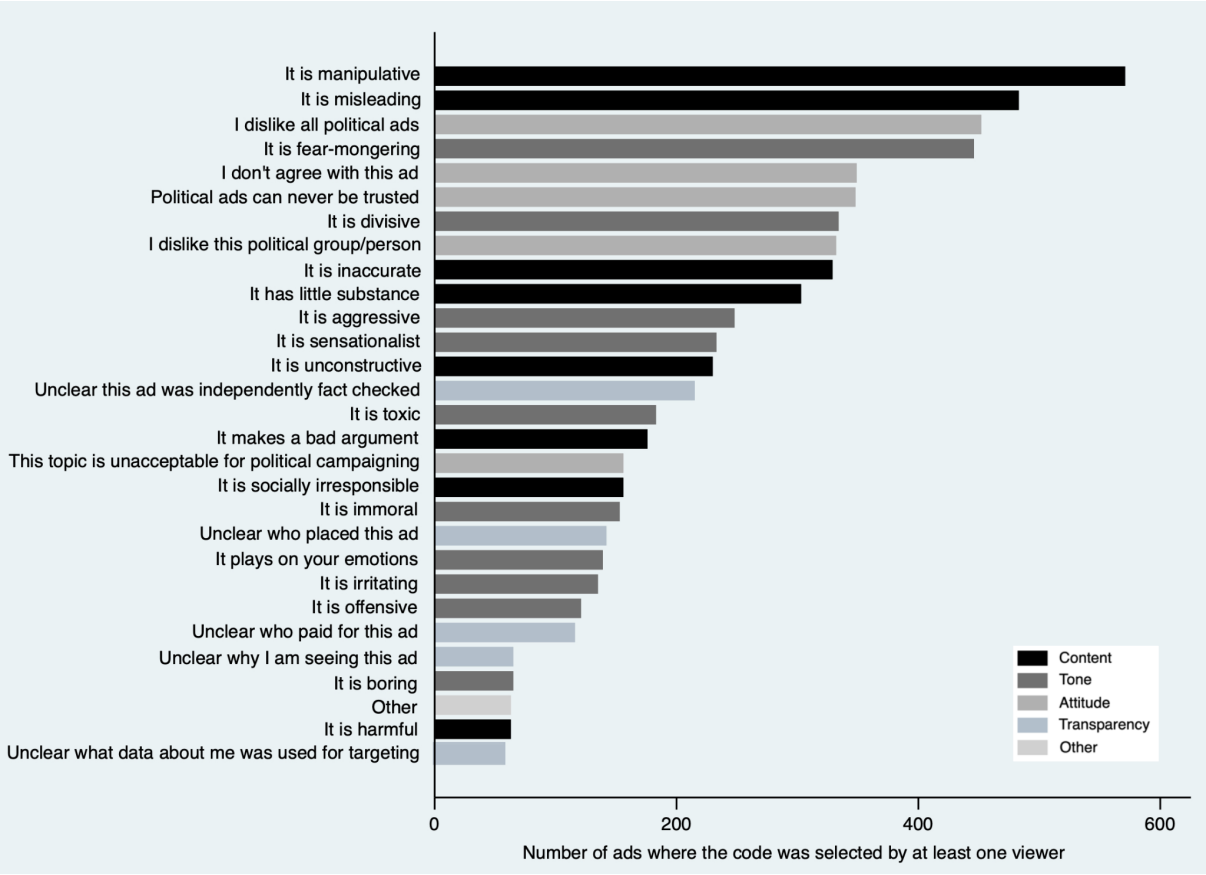


Figure 3. The reasons why people find the ads unacceptable: ad level analysis



Appendix

Table A1. Sources of ads

Code	**Names of the advertising accounts**	
Labour_source (3)	the_labour_party	keir_starmer jeremy_corbyn
Conservative_source (3)	conservatives	theresa_may boris_johnson
Other_party_source (14)	uk_independence_party_(ukip) social_democratic_and_labour_party liberal_democrats scottish_national_party_(snp) alliance_party_of_northern_ireland democratic_unionist_party plaid_cymru green_party_of_england_and_wales reform_uk	 colum_eastwood ed_davey liz_saville_roberts_as_mp nigel_farage richard_tice
Satellite_source (25)	**Anti-Labour (6)**	**Anti-Conservative (11)**
	campaign_against_corbynism right_to_rent,_right_to_buy,_right_to_own 3rd_party_ltd fair_tax_campaign capitalist_worker parents'_choice	health_campaigns_together for_our_future's_sake campaign_together we_own_it led_by_donkeys another_europe_is_possible
	Pro-Labour (6)	our_future,_our_choice
	momentum make_it_stop unite_the_union real_change_lab unison gmb_union	campaign_central advancetogether vote_for_a_final_say tactical.vote
	Anti-SNP (1)	**Pro-Conservative (1)**
	scotland_in_union	the_uk_union_voice

Table A2. Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Age	43.25	14.60	18	90
Gender	0.46	0.50	0	1
Education	3.62	0.99	1	5
Minority	2.20	1.91	1	7
Party knowledge	4.17	1.46	1	7
Partisan strength	3.75	1.52	1	7
Importance of democracy	6.11	1.22	1	7
Social trust	4.06	1.39	1	7
Political trust	3.23	1.20	1	7
Trust in Facebook	1.98	1.15	1	7

Table A3. Variable Coding

Coding scheme
Ad acceptability is measured by a survey question asking, 'Do you find the content of this ad acceptable?', with answers coded from 1 'definitely no' to 6 'definitely yes'. *Ad legality* is measured by asking, 'Would you say this advert was legal?' after showing the ad, with answers coded from 1 'definitely no' to 6 'definitely yes' and 7 'I can't say'. Likewise, the same questions are asked about ad *decency*, *honesty*, and *truthfulness*. The *reasons for ad unacceptability* is measured by asking 'If you found the content of the advert unacceptable, why was that (tick your top 3 reasons)?' There are 28 options and a free text box to choose from. We coded reasons of unacceptability using aggregated measures. *Attitude* consists of 'I dislike all political ads', 'I dislike this political group/person', 'I don't agree with this advert', 'This topic is unacceptable for political campaigning', and 'Political adverts can never be trusted'. *Content* consists of 'It is inaccurate', 'It is unconstructive', 'It is manipulative', 'It is harmful', 'It is misleading', 'It has little substance', 'It is socially irresponsible', and 'It makes a bad argument'. *Tone* consists of 'It is sensationalist', 'It is offensive', 'It is aggressive', 'It is divisive', 'It is immoral', 'It is toxic', 'It is fear-mongering', 'It is irritating', 'It is boring', and 'It plays on your emotions'. *Transparency* consists of 'Unclear who placed this advert', 'Unclear who paid for this advert', 'Unclear why I am seeing this advert', 'Unclear what data about me was used to target this advert', and 'Unclear this advert was independently fact checked'. The *reasons for ad acceptability* is measured by asking 'If you found the content of the advert acceptable, why was that (tick your top 3 reasons)?' The 28 answer options are the exact opposites of the reasons for unacceptability. Whether an ad is seen as *political* is measured by asking 'Do you think it is clear that this ad is political?' The answers are coded as 1 'yes', 0 'no', and 0 'not sure'. *Age* is a continuous variable starting from 18 years of age. *Gender* is coded as 1 'male' and 0 'female'. *Education* is coded as 1 'No formal qualifications', 2 'GCSE level, or equivalent', 3 'A-level, or equivalent', 4 'Undergraduate University (e.g. BA, B.Sc, B.Ed)', and 5 'Postgraduate (e.g. M.Sc, Ph.D)'. *Party affiliation* is coded into four dummy variables 'Conservative voters', 'Labour voters', 'other voters' (including voters of Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, UK Independence Party, Green Party, British National Party and Reform UK) and 'no party affiliation'.

Accordingly, ads placed by parties and their leaders are coded into 'Labour source', 'Conservative source', 'other source' and 'satellite source' (see Appendix Table A1 for details).

The strength of one's partisanship is coded from 1 'not at all strong' to 7 'very strong'.

Party knowledge is measured by asking, 'How well informed do you think you are about party politics in general?', with answers coding from 1 'not at all informed' to 7 'very well informed'.

Minority status is measured by asking respondents whether they perceive themselves as part of a minority group because of ethnicity, sexuality or other enduring characteristics, with answers coding from 1 'not at all' to 7 'strongly believe so'.

Importance of democracy is measured by asking respondents how important it is for them to live in a country that is governed democratically, with answers coding from 1 'not at all important' to 7 'absolutely important'.

Trust in people and *Trust in Facebook* are both coded from 1 'no trust' to 7 'full trust'.

Political trust is aggregated (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) from the variables of 'trust in UK parliament', 'trust in the Government', 'trust in political parties', 'trust in the police', and 'trust in the legal system', all coded from 1 'no trust' to 7 'full trust'.

Third-person perception is calculated in three steps. First, we ask respondents that 'thinking about the impact of the political parties' election messages on *you*, to what extent do you agree or disagree that it helps: to raise your awareness of political issues; raise your awareness of political candidates or parties; prompt you to share messages related to the election; prompt you to vote or register to vote; persuade you to change who you are planning to vote for; and influence how you feel about political opponents'. Each of these questions has answers from 1 'strongly disagree' to 7 'strongly agree'. We then aggregate these measures to create a variable called *TPP_Me* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). Second, we ask the same set of questions but on the impact of election messages on t*he typical voter*. Again, we aggregate these measures to create another variable called *TPP_Others* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$). Finally, we generate *third-person perception* by subtracting TPP_Me from TPP_Others.

Table A4. Relative prominence of reasons accounting for perceptions of unacceptability: ad level analysis

Unacceptability	Selections	Percent	Acceptability	Selections	Percent
Content (8)					
It is manipulative	571	37.9%	It is ingenuous	53	2.49%
It is misleading	483	32.1%	It is truthful	434	20.4%
It is inaccurate	329	21.8%	It is accurate	412	19.4%
It has little substance	303	20.1%	It has a lot of substance	186	8.7%
It is unconstructive	230	15.3%	It is constructive	453	21.3%
It makes a bad argument	176	11.7%	It makes a good argument	756	35.6%
It is socially irresponsible	156	10.4%	It is socially responsible	224	10.5%
It is harmful	63	4.2%	It is unharmful	501	23.6%
Content Total	1,177	78.1%		1,564	73.6%
Tone (10)					
It is fear-mongering	446	29.6%	It is reassuring	131	6.2%
It is divisive	334	22.2%	It is unifying	201	9.5%
It is aggressive	248	16.5%	It is peaceful	386	18.2%
It is sensationalist	233	15.5%	It is unexaggerated	241	11.3%
It is toxic	183	12.1%	It is non-toxic	541	25.4%
It is immoral	153	10.2%	It is moral	204	9.6%
It is boring	65	4.3%	It is entertaining	264	12.4%
It is irritating	135	9.0%	It is pleasing	75	3.5%
It is offensive	121	8.0%	It is respectful	421	19.8%
It plays on your emotions	139	9.2%	It doesn’t play on your emotions	258	12.1%
Tone Total	1,063	70.5%		1,382	65.0%
Attitude (5)					
I dislike all political ads	452	30.0%	I like all political ads	99	4.7%
I don't agree with this advert	349	23.2%	I agree with this advert	696	32.7%
I dislike this political	332	22.0%	I like this political	203	9.5%

group/person			group/person		
Political adverts can never be trusted	348	23.1%	Political adverts can be trusted	19	0.9%
This topic is unacceptable for political campaigning	156	10.4%	This topic is acceptable for political campaigning	1,296	61.0%
Attitude Total	969	64.3%		1,599	75.2%
Transparency (5)					
Unclear this advert was independently fact checked	215	14.3%	It is clear this political advert was independently fact checked	27	1.3%
Unclear who placed this advert	142	9.4%	It is clear who placed this advert	1,112	52.3%
Unclear who paid for this advert	116	7.7%	It is clear who paid for this advert	836	39.3%
Unclear why I am seeing this advert	65	4.3%	It is clear why I am seeing this advert	365	17.2%
Unclear what data about me was used to target this advert	57	3.8%	It is clear what data about me was used to target the political advert	79	3.7%
Transparency Total	442	29.3%		1,406	66.1%
Other (free text options)	63	4.2%	Other (free text options)	108	5.1%
Total number of ads rated by at least one viewer as unacceptable	1,507	63.5%	Total number of ads rated by at least one viewer as acceptable	2,126	89.5%

Note: Table A4 displays the total number of ads that received a specific code selection by at least one viewer, along with the percentage of unacceptable or acceptable ads that each code represented. To obtain the percentage in the 'Unacceptability Percent' column, for example, we divided the 'Selections' number by 1,507, which is the total number of unacceptable ads.

Table A5. Free text entries for reasons of perceiving an ad as unacceptable

39 text entries
A political party aligning with a tabloid is worrisome.
Ad is out of date
Ad's targeting people rather than the topic with good answers feeds into the disillusionment
Again, impossible to judge properly from just a screenshot, would have to see the actual video to be able to answer accurately
Brexit has already happened, so can't be stopped, it's a bit inaccurate I think
Brexit is already done, I distinctly remember this chucklefuck causing it
Can't read the advert itself
Can't see advert
Clearly paid for
Corbyn had the whip removed in 2020 - why is the party sponsoring his ads?
I am unable to niew as it says I can't verify my age
I cannot say with certainty that it is dishonest or misleading but I have a feeling in my gut that it is both.
I cannot see the ad, impossible to judge it.
I did not find this advert unacceptable
I dislike ads that mock physical features of political opponents regardless of side
I don't know what the content of the video is so very difficult to form an opinion.
I dont agree with political adverts that are solely "The other side is bad", although I despise Boris Johnson
I don’t like the promoting of tactical voting.
It cannot deliver on its promise
There was no election on 12th December 2021
Use of a picture of a child
Video won’t play
Was not allowed to see the advert

Whilst the point of inheritance tax maybe valid under the proposal using the word "steal" is not the right way to make a point

ad would not show

don't trust FACEBOOK ADS

i dont know the conent of the ad as it wont let me watch the video

i dont like jeremy corbyn

it uses a picture of Jeremy Corban who wasn't the labour leader at the time

making you feel you only have 1 choice to vote for

my only issue is its trying to find out your voting intention

no info on poster

not had the best experience with NHS, would rather the American way

obvious racist connotations to appeal to racists

say nothing of themsleves just attacks

showing face of baby

the vote was for brexit so they shouldnt want to change it

too little info just from teh still

typically vague/rhetorical

Note: These comments report the precise text entered by respondents (and accompanying typos).