

The Effect of Ad Clutter on Consumer Attention Across Media Platforms

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Abstract

The proliferation of advertising across print, television, digital, social media, and mobile platforms has generated an unprecedented volume of commercial stimuli competing for finite consumer attention. Ad clutter — defined as the condition in which an excess of advertising messages overwhelms a consumer's ability to process individual communications — has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing both scholars of communication and practitioners of marketing. This paper examines the effect of ad clutter on consumer attention across multiple media platforms, synthesizing theoretical frameworks including the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Cognitive Load Theory, the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, Schema Incongruity Theory, and the Persuasion Knowledge Model. Drawing exclusively on five empirically grounded sources, this review finds that ad clutter consistently impairs attention, reduces recall, heightens avoidance behaviors, and diminishes purchase intentions — though relevance, schema incongruity, and individual cognitive differences moderate these outcomes. An original analogy linking ancient marketplace noise to contemporary digital feed saturation illuminates the enduring nature of consumers' attention-filtering instincts. The paper concludes with practical guidance for advertisers seeking to cut through clutter and calls for future research into the regulatory and algorithmic dimensions of advertising congestion.

Keywords: ad clutter, consumer attention, media platforms, banner blindness, advertising avoidance, attention economy

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There is a remarkable paradox at the heart of modern advertising. Global digital ad spending continues to climb year over year, with Google, Meta, and Amazon collectively capturing more than half of the world's digital advertising revenue. Yet consumers are increasingly tuning out. Banner blindness is pervasive. Skip rates on video pre-roll advertisements are high. Scroll speeds on social media feeds have accelerated. How, then, does a field that invests billions of dollars annually end up with audiences that notice less, remember less, and resent more?

The answer lies in ad clutter. Broadly defined, ad clutter refers to the overwhelming volume of advertising messages that compete simultaneously for a consumer's limited attentional resources, such that individual advertisements lose their capacity to be distinctly perceived,

processed, or recalled.¹ This concept is not merely an abstract theoretical concern — it has material consequences for brand equity, conversion rates, and media platform sustainability. When too many messages fight for the same eyeballs, every advertiser ultimately loses.

This paper investigates the effect of ad clutter on consumer attention across five major media platforms: print, television, digital (web), social media, and mobile. In doing so, it draws on a body of scholarship that spans cognitive psychology, communication theory, and consumer behavior. The central research questions guiding this review are: (a) How does ad clutter manifest differently across media platforms? (b) What cognitive and affective mechanisms explain consumers' responses to clutter? (c) What individual and contextual factors moderate those responses? And (d) what practical implications emerge for advertisers and regulators in the attention economy? The paper proceeds by reviewing relevant literature, establishing a theoretical framework, conducting a cross-platform analysis, evaluating empirical evidence, developing a historical analogy between ancient marketplace noise and modern digital saturation, and synthesizing findings in a discussion oriented toward actionable insight.

Literature Review

Attention is not infinite. Cognitive scientists have long established that human beings possess limited working memory capacity, and that selectively directing attention to one stimulus necessarily reduces the cognitive resources available for processing others. In advertising research, this foundational insight gave rise to the concept of ad clutter as a structural problem: not merely a matter of individual ad quality, but of the competitive environment in which every advertisement must operate.² When forty advertisements compete for a single page, no single advertisement receives the attention it would command if presented alone.

Early scholarship on clutter focused primarily on television. Researchers observed that as the number of commercial breaks in a broadcast increased, viewer recall of individual advertisements declined sharply, and overall attitudes toward the advertisements grew more negative. This finding was intuitive but consequential: it demonstrated that advertising effectiveness is partly a function of the advertising environment rather than solely of the advertisement itself. From television, the clutter construct migrated to print, then to digital, and most recently to social media and mobile platforms — each transition bringing new dimensions of complexity.

In the digital domain, the clutter problem is compounded by the speed and volume of content delivery. Azzopardi et al. (2023) introduced the evocative concept of the "distractor tax" to describe the attentional cost imposed on users when irrelevant stimuli are present in an

¹Kim, N.Y. & Sundar, S.S., "Relevance to the Rescue: Can 'Smart Ads' Reduce Negative Response to Online Ad Clutter?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87(2), 2010, p. 348.

²Kim, N.Y. & Sundar, S.S., "Relevance to the Rescue: Can 'Smart Ads' Reduce Negative Response to Online Ad Clutter?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87(2), 2010, p. 345.

information environment.³ Their experimental evidence shows that even one in ten participants clicked on a distractor — an off-task stimulus — when such distractors were present, suggesting that clutter does not merely reduce attention to target information but actively redirects behavior. This finding has significant implications for digital advertising, where competing ad formats, notification banners, autoplay videos, and algorithmic recommendations all function simultaneously as potential distractors.

Platform economics shape the clutter landscape in important ways. Anderson and Peitz (2023) demonstrated that smaller media platforms systematically advertise at higher densities than larger ones because they internalize a smaller share of the congestion costs they impose on consumers.⁴ Put differently, a large platform like YouTube or Facebook has a stronger incentive to manage ad load because alienating users damages a significant revenue base, whereas a smaller platform may rationally tolerate higher clutter because the per-user value of additional advertising revenue exceeds the marginal cost of user disengagement. This economic dynamic helps explain why clutter is often most acute on the platforms consumers would least expect — smaller niche sites, free content aggregators, and mobile applications with freemium business models.

On social media specifically, Çelik et al. (2024) identified perceived goal impediment — the sense that advertising interrupts or delays the achievement of a primary browsing objective — as a critical driver of affective avoidance.⁵ Their work distinguishes between cognitive avoidance (not processing an ad) and affective avoidance (actively disliking the advertising environment), showing that clutter drives both, with particularly strong effects among consumers who have had prior negative advertising experiences. This distinction is valuable because it clarifies that clutter does not merely create inattention but generates emotional antagonism toward brands, platforms, and advertising as an institution.

Counterintuitively, the literature also identifies pathways through which individual advertisements can overcome clutter. Ismail (2024), drawing on schema incongruity theory, found that small businesses on Instagram achieved greater attentional cut-through when their ads violated consumers' expectations — presenting visual or narrative elements that were surprising relative to what the consumer anticipated from the category or brand.⁶ This bottom-up, stimulus-driven capture of attention operates through mechanisms distinct from the top-down, goal-directed

³Azzopardi, L., Maxwell, D., Halvey, M. & Hauff, C., "The Distractor Tax: Understanding the Impact of Distractors on User Attention in Search," Proceedings of the 46th International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval, 2023, p. 2271.

⁴Anderson, S.P. & Peitz, M., "Ad Clutter, Time Use, and Media Diversity," American Economic Review, 113(7), 2023, p. 1900.

⁵Çelik, F., Yıldız, S.Y., Özkara, B.Y., Çam, M.S. & Ibrahim, B., "Ad Clutter, Goal Impediment, and Affective Avoidance: How Advertising Overload Shapes Consumer Behavior," Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 78, 2024, p. 4.

⁶Ismail, A.J., Schema Incongruity and Advertising Effectiveness on Instagram: A Small Business Perspective (Doctoral thesis), 2024, p. 45.

attention that most advertisers attempt to harness. Schema incongruity essentially "hijacks" the perceptual system, forcing engagement before the consumer's filtering mechanisms can suppress the stimulus. Similarly, Kim and Sundar (2010) established that relevance — the degree to which an advertisement aligns with the consumer's current informational needs or interests — can substantially offset the negative effects of clutter on attitudes toward advertisements and toward the website hosting them.

Theoretical Framework

Multiple theoretical lenses are required to make sense of how ad clutter affects consumer attention, each illuminating a different facet of a complex process. Together, they form a coherent explanatory architecture.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo, posits that persuasion occurs via two routes: a central route characterized by careful, effortful evaluation of message content, and a peripheral route characterized by reliance on heuristic cues such as source attractiveness or message length. Ad clutter forces consumers toward the peripheral route by depleting the cognitive resources necessary for central processing. When dozens of advertisements compete for attention simultaneously, there is simply not enough cognitive bandwidth left for elaborative processing of any individual message.⁷ The implication is that clutter does not merely reduce exposure but qualitatively degrades the nature of engagement: consumers who do attend to an advertisement under conditions of high clutter are more likely to rely on superficial cues than to genuinely evaluate claims.

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller) extends this logic by specifying the mechanisms of cognitive overload. When the total informational demand placed on working memory exceeds its capacity, performance on all tasks degrades. Azzopardi et al. (2023) operationalized this insight in search contexts, demonstrating that distractor load — the informational complexity imposed by irrelevant stimuli — creates measurable performance costs, what they termed the "distractor tax."⁸ This framework is particularly useful for understanding clutter on content-rich digital pages, where multiple ad units, navigation menus, recommended article feeds, and social sharing widgets all impose simultaneous cognitive demands on the user.

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework, originating with Mehrabian and Russell's environmental psychology research, provides a structural account of how advertising environments produce consumer responses. In this model, clutter is a stimulus feature of the advertising environment that operates through internal organismic states — cognitive load, arousal, negative affect — to produce behavioral responses such as avoidance, disengagement, or

⁷Kim, N.Y. & Sundar, S.S., "Relevance to the Rescue: Can 'Smart Ads' Reduce Negative Response to Online Ad Clutter?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87(2), 2010, p. 347.

⁸Azzopardi, L., Maxwell, D., Halvey, M. & Hauff, C., "The Distractor Tax: Understanding the Impact of Distractors on User Attention in Search," *Proceedings of the 46th International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval*, 2023, p. 2272.

platform abandonment. Çelik et al. (2024) implicitly adopt this framework in showing that clutter produces perceived goal impediment (an organismic state) that in turn generates affective avoidance (a behavioral response).⁹

Schema Incongruity Theory offers a mechanism for escaping the attentional trap that clutter creates. When a stimulus departs significantly from established schemas — mental frameworks built from prior experience — it generates an orienting response, automatically commanding attention. Ismail (2024) applied this theory specifically to Instagram advertising among small businesses, finding that incongruent visual or narrative elements triggered bottom-up attentional capture that bypassed consumers' habitual filtering routines.¹⁰ Finally, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright) explains why clutter intensifies consumers' defensive responses to advertising. As advertising density increases, consumers become more acutely aware that they are the targets of persuasion attempts, activating their persuasion knowledge — an internalized repertoire of beliefs, theories, and coping strategies — with greater frequency and intensity. The result is heightened skepticism, reduced credibility attributions, and stronger motivation to avoid advertising messages.

Cross-Platform Analysis

Ad clutter is not a monolithic phenomenon; it takes distinctly different forms across media platforms, and understanding these differences is essential for both theory and practice. Considering the breadth of platforms on which advertising now appears, a comparative analysis reveals both common underlying dynamics and important platform-specific variations.

In **print media**, clutter manifests as the ratio of advertising to editorial content within a publication. A magazine page dominated by a full-page advertisement for a luxury fragrance creates a very different attentional environment than a page containing three competing quarter-page advertisements for competing product categories. Research has consistently shown that consumer recall of print advertisements declines as the number of competing advertisements on a page or within a magazine issue increases. Individual differences in perceptual speed — the rate at which consumers can scan and process visual information — moderate this effect considerably, with slower processors experiencing disproportionately severe clutter effects.

On **television**, clutter operates temporally rather than spatially. The lengthening of commercial breaks, the proliferation of program-length commercials, and the insertion of in-program product placements all compete for viewer attention within a single viewing session. Anderson and Peitz (2023) note that consumer welfare can actually decline with platform entry in advertising-supported media markets when new platforms fail to internalize the congestion costs

⁹Çelik, F., Yıldız, S.Y., Özkara, B.Y., Çam, M.S. & Ibrahim, B., "Ad Clutter, Goal Impediment, and Affective Avoidance: How Advertising Overload Shapes Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 78, 2024, p. 7.

¹⁰Ismail, A.J., *Schema Incongruity and Advertising Effectiveness on Instagram: A Small Business Perspective* (Doctoral thesis), 2024, p. 61.

they impose: more advertising platforms can paradoxically mean more total advertising without proportionally more editorial content.¹¹ Platform-switching behavior — the tendency of viewers to change channels during commercial breaks — represents a behavioral adaptation to clutter that has been documented since the early days of television remote controls.

In **digital environments**, clutter takes its most complex form. A single web page may simultaneously host display banner advertisements in multiple zones, pre-roll video advertising, sponsored content indistinguishable from editorial, pop-up overlays, and dynamic retargeting advertisements that follow users across sessions. Azzopardi et al. (2023) found that even when distractors are not advertising-related — they used off-task information links in a search environment — the mere presence of competing stimuli imposed measurable attentional costs.¹² In advertising contexts, where stimuli are designed to attract attention, these costs are almost certainly more severe. Banner blindness — the documented tendency of internet users to systematically avoid fixating on areas of a web page associated with advertising — is the most studied manifestation of digital ad clutter adaptation.

On **social media** platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, the clutter dynamic is further complicated by the blending of advertising with organic social content. This integration strategy — native advertising — reduces the perceived intrusiveness of individual advertisements but does not reduce the total attentional load imposed by the advertising environment. Ismail (2024) demonstrates that on Instagram, small businesses can successfully compete in cluttered feeds by deploying schema-incongruent visuals that interrupt the aesthetic monotony of algorithmically curated content.¹³ Yet this very strategy, if adopted at scale, would itself create a new form of clutter: an environment saturated with deliberately shocking or unexpected imagery, raising the threshold for attention capture further.

On **mobile platforms**, the clutter problem is intensified by screen size constraints and the goal-directed nature of most mobile usage. Çelik et al. (2024) identify perceived goal impediment — the experience of advertising as an obstacle to the completion of a primary task — as a particularly powerful driver of negative responses on mobile, where users are frequently engaged in urgent or task-specific behavior such as navigation, messaging, or quick information retrieval.¹⁴ Full-screen interstitial advertisements on mobile applications represent arguably the most

¹¹Anderson, S.P. & Peitz, M., "Ad Clutter, Time Use, and Media Diversity," *American Economic Review*, 113(7), 2023, p. 1902.

¹²Azzopardi, L., Maxwell, D., Halvey, M. & Hauff, C., "The Distractor Tax: Understanding the Impact of Distractors on User Attention in Search," *Proceedings of the 46th International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval*, 2023, p. 2273.

¹³Ismail, A.J., *Schema Incongruity and Advertising Effectiveness on Instagram: A Small Business Perspective* (Doctoral thesis), 2024, p. 78.

¹⁴Çelik, F., Yıldız, S.Y., Özkara, B.Y., Çam, M.S. & Ibrahim, B., "Ad Clutter, Goal Impediment, and Affective Avoidance: How Advertising Overload Shapes Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 78, 2024, p. 10.

extreme form of clutter-induced goal impediment currently in use, and their adoption is widespread despite documented negative effects on consumer attitude toward the advertising brand.

Empirical Evidence and Moderating Conditions

What does the empirical record actually show? Across the studies examined in this review, a consistent pattern emerges: elevated ad clutter reduces attention, impairs recall, generates negative affect, and diminishes behavioral intentions — but these effects are meaningfully moderated by a set of individual and contextual factors.

Kim and Sundar (2010) conducted experimental research examining how relevance moderates the negative effects of online ad clutter on consumers' attitudes toward advertisements and toward the hosting website. Their central finding was that highly relevant advertisements — those algorithmically matched to a user's stated or inferred interests — significantly attenuated the negative attitude consequences of clutter.¹⁵ In other words, "smart ads" that align with consumer interests function as attentional and attitudinal antidotes to the ambient noise of a cluttered environment. This finding has become a cornerstone rationale for behavioral targeting and programmatic advertising: if you can make each advertisement feel personally relevant, the clutter problem partially solves itself. The important qualification here is that relevance must be genuine and consumer-perceived, not merely technically accurate; advertisements that use consumer data in ways perceived as intrusive can generate a backlash that negates any relevance benefit.

Azzopardi et al. (2023) provided experimental evidence for what they termed the "distractor tax" in search environments. Participants who encountered irrelevant information stimuli while searching for a target experienced slower task completion, reduced accuracy, and occasional click-through on distractors.¹⁶ Notably, approximately one in ten participants clicked on a distractor, suggesting that even attentive, goal-directed users are not immune to the attentional pull of competing stimuli. For advertisers, this finding is paradoxically encouraging and cautionary: distractors do capture some attention, but the form of attention captured is typically task-interrupting and negatively valenced rather than the receptive, positive engagement that effective advertising requires.

Anderson and Peitz (2023) contributed an economic perspective, modeling the platform-level incentives that drive advertising density decisions. Their analysis reveals that market structure matters: smaller platforms advertise more per unit of content because they internalize less of the congestion cost imposed on consumers.¹⁷ This has implications for competition policy. If regulators seek to reduce advertising clutter, simply encouraging market entry — adding more

¹⁵Kim, N.Y. & Sundar, S.S., "Relevance to the Rescue: Can 'Smart Ads' Reduce Negative Response to Online Ad Clutter?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87(2), 2010, p. 350.

¹⁶Azzopardi, L., Maxwell, D., Halvey, M. & Hauff, C., "The Distractor Tax: Understanding the Impact of Distractors on User Attention in Search," *Proceedings of the 46th International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval*, 2023, p. 2275.

¹⁷Anderson, S.P. & Peitz, M., "Ad Clutter, Time Use, and Media Diversity," *American Economic Review*, 113(7), 2023, p. 1905.

platforms — may be counterproductive, producing more total advertising without proportionally more consumer value. Their model suggests that platform size and market concentration, paradoxically, may support lower ad loads by giving dominant platforms a stronger incentive to maintain consumer experience quality.

Ismail (2024) examined small business advertising on Instagram, finding that schema-incongruent advertisements — those that violated category expectations through unexpected visual composition, color usage, or narrative framing — achieved significantly stronger attentional engagement than convention-adhering advertisements in the same cluttered environment.¹⁸ This finding is important for small and medium-sized enterprises that cannot compete with large brands on advertising volume. Creativity and incongruity offer a viable alternative pathway through the clutter, one accessible to firms regardless of budget size.

Çelik et al. (2024) explored the motivational and experiential drivers of ad avoidance in cluttered environments, identifying prior negative advertising experience and perceived goal impediment as the primary antecedents of affective avoidance.¹⁹ Critically, they found that ad clutter moderates the relationship between goal impediment and purchase intention: consumers who experience high clutter and perceive their goals as frequently impeded show the steepest drops in purchase intention. Moreover, consumers with higher cognitive failure propensity — those more prone to attentional lapses, memory failures, and task-switching errors — are disproportionately affected by clutter, experiencing more acute avoidance responses and more severe degradation of purchase intention. These individual difference findings challenge the assumption that ad clutter is a uniform problem; its impact is distributed unevenly across the population.

From the Agora to the Algorithm: An Enduring Human Instinct

The challenge of navigating a cacophonous commercial environment is far older than the internet, older than television, and older than the printing press. To understand why consumers respond to ad clutter the way they do, it helps to look backward — not just decades, but millennia.

In the ancient agoras of Athens and the souks of medieval Baghdad, merchants competed vigorously for the attention of passersby. Multiple vendors selling similar goods would shout simultaneously, each attempting to outdo the others in volume, in wit, and in the extravagance of their claims. Handwritten notices competed for wall space on public bulletin boards. Town criers announced multiple messages from multiple patrons in rapid succession. Anyone who has walked through a modern street market — in Istanbul, Mumbai, or Marrakesh — knows that this experience has not entirely vanished; what persists is the instinct it developed in consumers.

¹⁸Ismail, A.J., *Schema Incongruity and Advertising Effectiveness on Instagram: A Small Business Perspective* (Doctoral thesis), 2024, p. 82.

¹⁹Çelik, F., Yıldız, S.Y., Özkara, B.Y., Çam, M.S. & Ibrahim, B., "Ad Clutter, Goal Impediment, and Affective Avoidance: How Advertising Overload Shapes Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 78, 2024, p. 12.

Faced with an overwhelm of competing commercial voices, ancient consumers developed filtering mechanisms. They learned to walk through marketplaces without consciously registering every merchant's call. They developed heuristics — trusted vendors, recognized quality signals, familiar product categories — that allowed efficient navigation of chaotic commercial environments without exhausting cognitive resources. In modern terminology, they implemented top-down, goal-directed attention, suppressing the bottom-up salience of irrelevant stimuli.

The contemporary digital consumer inhabits an infinitely scrollable marketplace. An Instagram feed is structurally analogous to the ancient souk: multiple vendors competing in a confined perceptual space, each deploying attention-capture techniques, each attempting to interrupt the consumer's primary behavioral flow. Banner blindness is not a failure of advertising creativity or a breakdown of consumer rationality. It is, instead, the most recent expression of a survival instinct that human beings have been refining for thousands of years. The algorithmic content filters of Facebook and the subconscious perceptual filters of an Athenian marketplace shopper are separated by twenty-five centuries of technology but united by identical function: they protect limited cognitive resources from being overwhelmed by an excess of competing claims. Understanding this is not merely intellectually satisfying; it carries practical implications. Consumers will always find ways to filter clutter. The challenge for advertisers is not to fight this instinct but to deserve exemption from it — by being relevant, surprising, honest, and genuinely useful.

Discussion

Taken together, the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence reviewed here converge on several key insights. First, ad clutter is a structural environmental condition rather than a property of any individual advertisement. Even a well-crafted, highly relevant advertisement suffers attentional and attitudinal penalties when it appears in a high-clutter environment. Second, the mechanisms through which clutter operates are both cognitive (depleting processing resources) and affective (generating negative emotional responses to the advertising environment as a whole). Third, these effects are heterogeneous across individuals: consumers with lower cognitive capacity, higher cognitive failure propensity, or longer histories of negative advertising experience are systematically more vulnerable to clutter's effects. Kim and Sundar (2010) and Çelik et al. (2024) both provide evidence for these moderating roles.²⁰

For advertising practitioners, the implications are pointed. On digital platforms, behavioral targeting that genuinely matches advertisement content to consumer interest — not merely consumer demographic profile — can meaningfully offset clutter effects, as Kim and Sundar's research demonstrates. On social media, particularly Instagram, schema incongruity offers an affordable creative strategy: small businesses willing to experiment with unexpected visual

²⁰Kim, N.Y. & Sundar, S.S., "Relevance to the Rescue: Can 'Smart Ads' Reduce Negative Response to Online Ad Clutter?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87(2), 2010, p. 352.

language can achieve attention in ways that large-budget repetition cannot guarantee.²¹ On mobile platforms, where perceived goal impediment is most acute, advertisers should strongly consider formats that integrate naturally into consumer task flows rather than interrupting them.

Regulatory perspectives deserve serious consideration. India's Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has issued guidelines addressing misleading advertising density, though enforcement remains inconsistent. The European Union's Digital Services Act, which came into force in 2023, introduces transparency requirements for algorithmic recommendation systems and targeted advertising, potentially creating an indirect check on clutter by mandating clearer labeling of advertising content. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission maintains oversight of deceptive advertising practices, and its recent attention to native advertising and sponsored content labeling addresses a dimension of clutter management — helping consumers distinguish advertising from editorial content — rather than advertising volume directly. The UK's Advertising Standards Authority similarly sets standards on advertising placement and volume, particularly in children's media contexts. Anderson and Peitz (2023) observe that market-level incentives frequently produce advertising densities that diverge from socially optimal levels, suggesting that regulatory intervention may be economically justified.²²

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The five empirical sources reviewed represent a selective rather than exhaustive literature synthesis, and the cross-platform comparative analysis draws on indirect inference in some cases rather than direct experimental comparison. Future research would benefit from large-scale, multi-platform experiments that vary ad load systematically across matched consumer samples, enabling cleaner causal inference about platform-specific clutter thresholds. The emerging domain of augmented and virtual reality advertising, where clutter will take three-dimensional spatial forms yet to be theorized, represents a particularly urgent frontier for scholarship.

Conclusion

Ad clutter is, at its core, a problem of scarcity: the scarcity of human attention in a world of advertising abundance. This paper has demonstrated that the problem manifests differently across print, television, digital, social media, and mobile platforms, but its underlying dynamics — cognitive overload, affective avoidance, and the activation of consumers' persuasion defenses — are consistent across contexts. The theoretical frameworks reviewed here, from the Elaboration Likelihood Model to Schema Incongruity Theory, provide a coherent account of why clutter affects consumers the way it does. The empirical evidence confirms that relevance, incongruity, and creative differentiation offer viable pathways through the clutter, while individual differences in cognitive capacity determine how severe the clutter toll will be for different consumer segments.

²¹Ismail, A.J., Schema Incongruity and Advertising Effectiveness on Instagram: A Small Business Perspective (Doctoral thesis), 2024, p. 90.

²²Anderson, S.P. & Peitz, M., "Ad Clutter, Time Use, and Media Diversity," *American Economic Review*, 113(7), 2023, p. 1908.

The ancient marketplace analogy is more than a literary device. It is a reminder that the attention economy is not a new invention but a new incarnation of a very old competitive dynamic. Consumers have always filtered commercial noise. They will continue to do so. The advertisers who thrive in this environment will be those who respect the limits of human attention rather than testing them — those who earn engagement rather than demanding it. As Azzopardi et al. (2023) caution, every distractor in a consumer's environment imposes a tax.²³ The most sophisticated advertising strategy available today is simply to become the stimulus that consumers choose not to filter out — and that requires quality, relevance, and genuine value, not merely volume.

In the attention economy, scarcity creates value. The rarest commodity in contemporary media is not advertising inventory — it is the willing, receptive attention of a consumer who feels that an advertisement deserves a moment of their time. Advertisers, platforms, and regulators who orient their decisions around this insight will be better positioned to navigate the clutter challenge that defines twenty-first century media.

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²³Azzopardi, L., Maxwell, D., Halvey, M. & Hauff, C., "The Distractor Tax: Understanding the Impact of Distractors on User Attention in Search," *Proceedings of the 46th International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval*, 2023, p. 2276.