

Online Personalization



CTRL+F

Where do we get our information online?

A lot of the information we see online comes from sources like:

- Social media (e.g. TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- Search engines (e.g. Google, Bing, etc.)
- News and link aggregation sites (e.g. Apple News, Google News, Reddit, etc.)

But when using these apps and websites we don't all see the same things!



Personalization

Social media apps and other websites **personalize** information for us: they show us content that they think we will like and be interested in.

What we see depends on two major factors:

- **Our data** that apps and websites collect about us
- **Our behaviour** online: what we engage with and who we follow

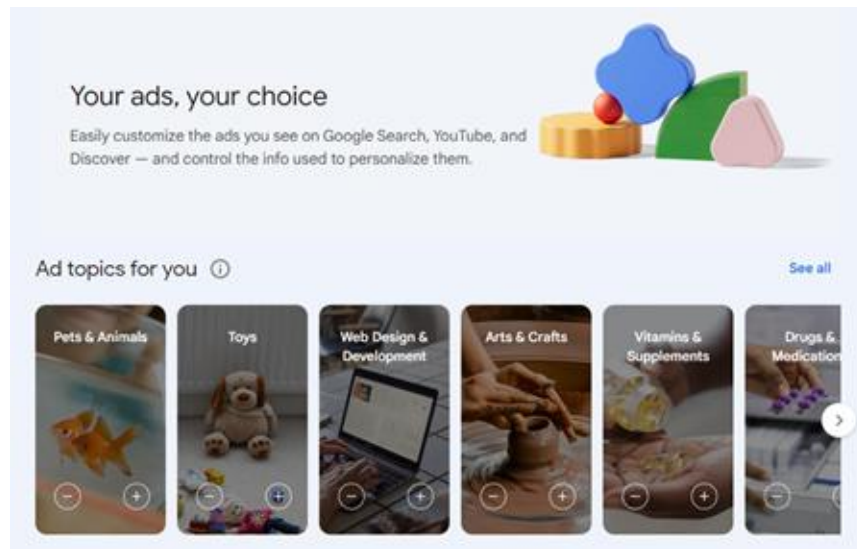


Our Data: Personal information

Different platforms will collect lots of different kinds of information about you. For example:

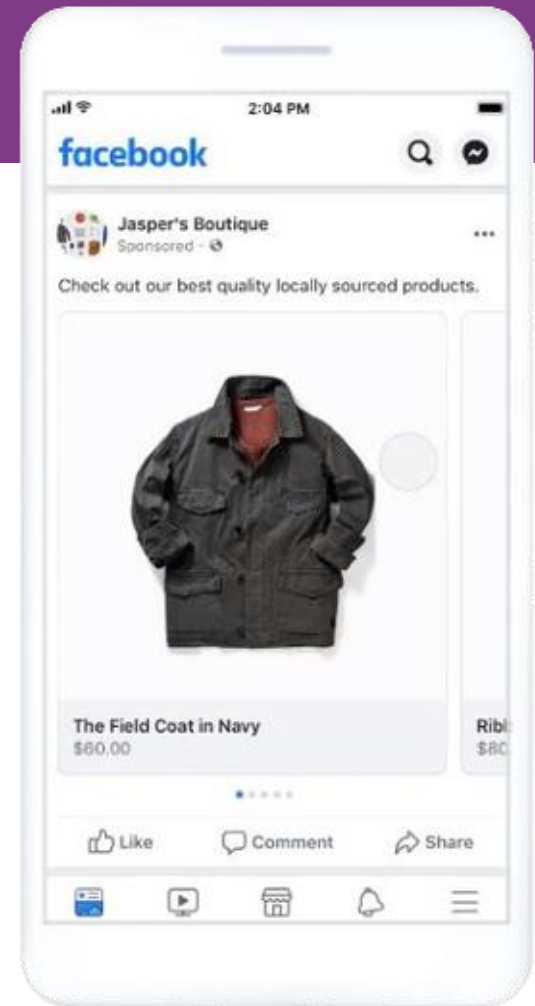
- Contact information: your name, location, and email address
- Age
- Interests
- Health information
- Search history

And more! Tech companies use this information to personalize ads and make recommendations



Our Data: Online history

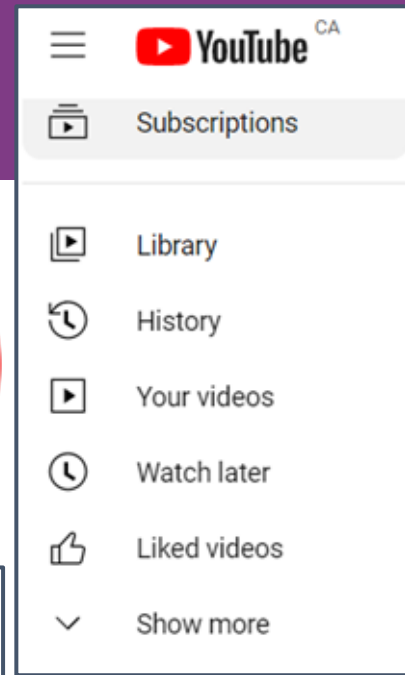
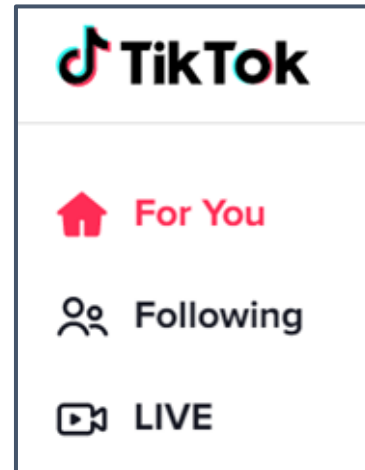
- Websites collect information about where you've been online, and use that to show you information they think you want to see.
 - Apps will track what you've visited, liked, and engaged with to recommend similar content.
 - Websites will also share information with one another.
- ***If you search for a product you may see ads for it on other websites!***



Our Behaviour: Engagement

What you *watch, like (or “heart”, or “upvote”, etc.), share, and comment on* will influence what you see.

- Social media platforms collect information about how you’ve engaged on their platforms, and then recommend new content.
 - They use **algorithms**: sets of instructions platforms and websites use to determine what information to show you.
- **What you click on will influence what you are shown in the future.**

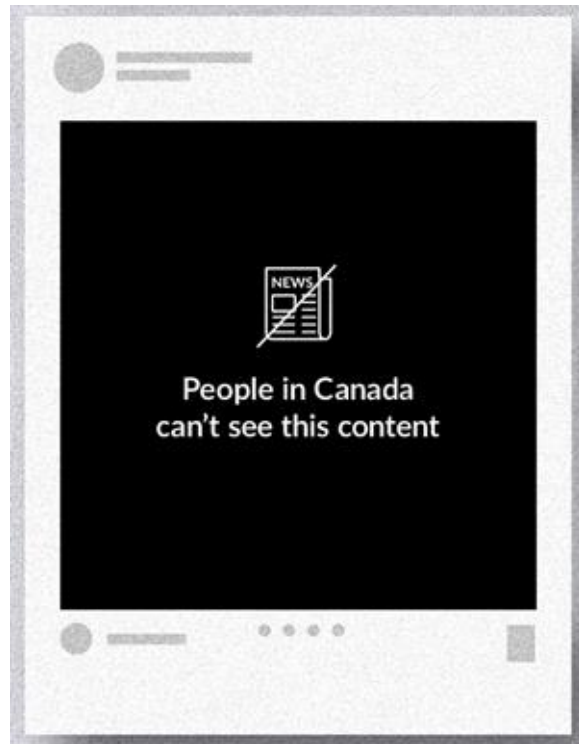


Our Behaviour: What platforms we use

Different platforms can provide different kinds of information, or information that tend to promote certain points of view

- You might see different content on X/Twitter than on Bluesky
- In Canada, you can read news on Reddit, but not on Facebook or Instagram
- You might see different reels on Snapchat as compared to Instagram

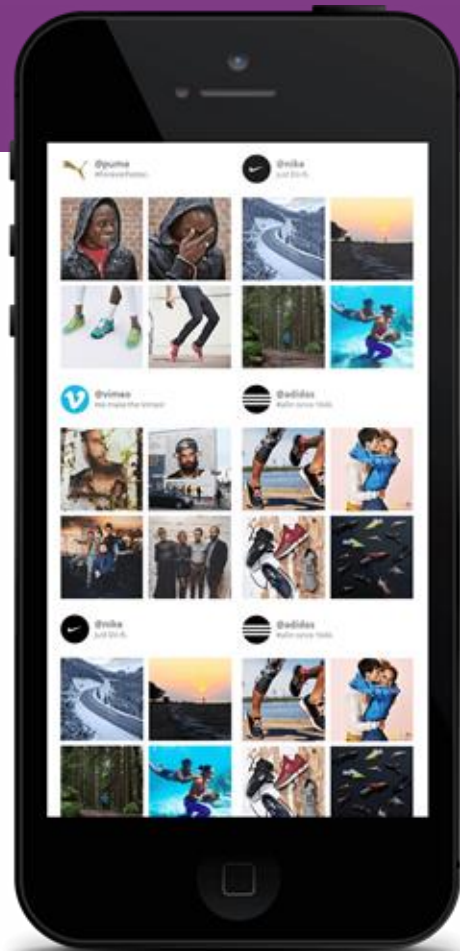
→ **Which apps you use and sites you visit determines what kind of content you see!**



Our Behaviour: What's familiar

Apps and websites like to show you more of the same things you like

- YouTube recommends content by creators you're subscribed to and whose videos you've watched
 - TikTok shows you content similar to what you spend more time viewing
- **People tend to engage with what's familiar, rather than what's different**



Discuss: Personalization Pros and Cons

Are there good things about personalized content online?

What are some reasons why personalization might be bad?

Pro: We can avoid low-quality information

If you engage with low-quality content you're more likely to see more of it.

But... if you engage with high-quality, reputable content, then you're more likely to see more of *that*!

Personalization can be a good thing when algorithms and our behaviour work together to filter out junk



Con: We might not get the whole story

Personalization means seeing more of the same.

But it also means that we might *not* see information that:

- Comes from sources we don't usually follow
- Is about new topics or issues that we haven't shown interested in before
- Challenges our beliefs

We can end up seeing the same kinds of things over and over again online, which means there could be a lot of information we're missing



Con: Companies can try to exploit us

Companies can use your data to give you relevant information...

...but they can also use it to try to get as much money as they can from you.

Example

- “Surveillance pricing” or “dynamic pricing” is when companies use your data to decide what you should pay
- This could work in your favour, or it could make things more expensive!

