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Digital marketers' perspectives of the future of cookieless online advertising

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A research article submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration

Johannesburg, 2023

DECLARATION

I, Vivian Mashadi Hlonyana, student number 2434798, declare that this research report titled "Investigating the future of cookie-less online advertising: a digital marketer perspective" is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University of Higher Education Institution for any other degree or examination purposes. I acknowledged, attributed, and referenced all ideas sourced elsewhere. I am hereby submitting it in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Business Administration at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

V Hlonyana

Vivian Hlonyana

Signed at Centurion on 26 February 2023

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Abstract

Over the years, digital advertisers have utilized the third-party cookie phenomenon to gain insights into online user behavior with the aim of generating targeted advertising. However, with the growing emphasis on user privacy, new privacy regulations have emerged, leading to the banning or impending ban of third-party cookies by major web browsers such a Google Chrome. This transformation is anticipated to have a significant impact on digital advertising operations, as the marketing strategies of these advertisers are dependent on the utilization of such cookies. The aim of this study is to examine the impact of the elimination of third-party cookies on digital marketers, both in terms of their current situation and anticipated future developments. To achieve this goal, a qualitative investigation was conducted, involving interviews with digital marketing experts, which were analyzed in conjunction with the relevant literature on third-party cookies, personalized advertising, and organizational change strategy theories. The findings indicate that most digital marketers are being affected by the removal of third-party cookies and are not fully prepared for the changes. However, the majority are engaged in researching, industry discussions, and attempting to adapt to the new environment. A variety of strategies and alternatives to third-party cookies are being introduced and considered, such as server-side tracking, leveraging first-party data, contextual advertising, email marketing, SEO, and content marketing. In conclusion, the study suggests that the end of third-party cookies does not imply the termination of personalized marketing.

Keywords: Third-party cookies, targeting, personalized advertising, first-party data

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CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

Online customers encounter third-party cookies whenever they use websites or online platforms on the internet that are enabled to track their personal information. The cookies are placed in websites by third parties, such as advertisement partners and social networks and other external services, to collect internet user information and improve online user experience. Kuehn (2013) also suggests that businesses, marketers, and advertisers use third-party cookies for activities such as data targeting and management, cross-channel targeting, profiling user behavior.

A cookie is a small text file stored in the user's browser that is used to access the internet (Aziz and Telang, 2015). There are different types of cookies: first-party cookies are created and placed by the website that the user is browsing while third-party cookies are created and placed by other companies and vendors mainly in the advertising technology (adtech) industry (Kuehn, 2013). Cookies have many functions, for the purpose of this research, the focus on cookies as an identifier and connector. As an identifier, a cookie labels a prospect by placing a cookie on their browser when they visit the website (Aziz and Telang, 2015). The brand then connects the user's different cookies from different websites, making it easier to retarget or customize online experience for the user. As a connector, if a brand wants to retarget that person out on the internet in other inventory, the cookies are enabled to connect to many of the other different cookies in different ad tech systems to find that person elsewhere on the web (Aziz and Telang, 2015). Third-party cookies are the ones that will be demised, following Google's 2020 decision to phase them out by 2023.

1.2 Background

Third-party cookies have long been used by brands to track website users, improve user experience and collect data to target adverts to the correct audience (Nelson, Shukla & Smith, 2020). For advertisers, the key benefit of third-party cookies is that they allow them to track what users were doing across the entire web within a single browser, not only on the site where the cookies were installed (Aziz and Telang, 2015). Advertisers and adtech businesses have been gathering personal information from consumers for the past two decades, often without explicitly requesting their permission or describing what they are doing with it (Bianco, 2020). As a result, when consumers see details about their lives and interests reflected in advertising, the relevancy that advertisers seek can appear to be intrusive. Concerns over the usage of third-party cookies, which have been labelled as a threat to user privacy, have arisen. Consumers have limited visibility into which organizations are processing their information and how their data is shared with outside aggregators because third-party cookies do not come from a website that a person has proactively visited or interacted with (Bianco, 2020).

In light of the preceding, Google made an announcement in January 2020 that it will stop supporting third-party cookies on Chrome in two years to re-architect web standards and improve user privacy (Angwin, 2012). This change will enable users to benefit from increased security and cookie control at the browser level (Bianco, 2020). As Chrome accounts for two thirds or the majority of web browsing globally, that decision is basically a decision for the internet as a whole. Other search engines such as Safari, Firefox, Mozilla have blocked the use of third-party cookies on their websites (Angwin, 2012). Although the project aims to support both consumer privacy and business requirements for advertisers and publishers by eliminating the need for third-party

cookies, given Chrome's 67 percent market share, the tech giant's decision will have a significant impact on consumers and the entire advertising industry (Bianco, 2020).

One of the major reasons behind the decision to disable cookies is that they are outdated technology (Angwin, 2021). First deployed in 1994, cookies are now rapidly becoming unfit for purpose as people now own multiple devices, multiple browsers within them, and the use of cookie-less technology is growing (Kuehn, 2013). Another reason is that there increasing consumer understanding and focus on privacy and control of personal data has changed consumer's attitudes and expectations around how the industry and brands that they work with use and store their data (Kuehn, 2013).

1.3 Research Problem

Third-party cookies allow marketers to see what users look at and interacting with, providing insights into the interests, demographics, geographical location, and other information about the user (Kuehn, 2013). Once marketers have access to this information, they can offer personalised content to users, but if the option is disabled, brands and advertisers may experience challenges in providing customized and timely content in an increasingly multichannel user journey. Third-party cookies have long been a key enabler of the commercial internet and of fine-grained digital ad targeting specifically. As third-party cookies fade away, a lot of modern adtech that relies on them to deliver relevant, personalized and targeted advertisements to users may become redundant. In the absence of third-party cookies, advertisers anticipate challenges in reporting on the effectiveness of their digital ads in terms of sales turnover, revenue, and other business outcome.

As cookies are so crucial to advertising technology, their removal will have a significant impact on how advertisers and marketers operate. There is uncertainty about their ability to control

online reach and frequency, measure and evaluate online user processes in the absence of third-party data. So, within all this disruption and change by far the biggest unknown is exactly how the new Chrome will work, and which advertising functionalities will continue to support. Media owners must find another way to provide appropriate ad experiences, analytics, and reporting connected with ad inventory and even collect regulatory consent signals without third-party cookies. Marketers' reliance on third-party data is coming to an end. Marketers need to now move forward towards more controlled and efficient ways for data management, more efficient campaign expenditure, and more tailored audiences thanks to the industries reinvigorated.

1.4 Research gap

Since the advent of e-commerce over the internet, digital marketers have benefited from third-party cookies to track, predict, and affect user behavior (Beck, 2015; Millett, Friedman, & Felten, 2001). As a result, researchers had minor considerations for the banning or absence of third-party cookies in their studies. This exposes the knowledge gap in cookie-less advertising, that is currently receiving more attention due to the recent decision to ban third-party cookies on browsers like Chrome.

In her research article, “an empirical analysis of consumer response to Google’s decision of phasing”, Bianco (2020) discovered that most consumers do not understand online behavioral advertising, especially the technology behind third-party cookies and how they are used to gather their information. However, this does not address the address the possibility of cookie-less web browser. In another study, Alreck and Settle’s (2007) analysis of consumer reactions to online behavioral tracking and targeting, found that a higher level of awareness of tracking and targeting and negative reactions, although not strident. Apparently, the blocking of third-party cookies had risen in the last decade, based on the statistics released by Web Trends (2021), a net analytics

agency. In agreement with Johnson, Shriver and Du (2020), the end result is that it is more difficult to target advertisements and track results, the capabilities driving advertising money from traditional media to online. Despite these findings, the prospect of the absence of third-party cookies remains vague. Odekerken-Schroder, de Wulf and Schumacher (2003) suggest that strong relationship outcomes not only depend upon successful relationship marketing tactics, but also upon consumer personality. Even though several studies since 2003 revealed that a growing number of consumers are reacting against marketers tracking their web behavior, there has been little appreciation of how the banning of third-party cookies may affect how advertisers will present personalised content to online consumers and, furthermore, how such a restriction may impact the consumer-brand relationship. This motivates the purpose of the study.

1.5 Purpose and relevance

The study is important because measuring the customer interaction and understanding marketing effectiveness are essential and assist brands to deliver personalised content. Personalized content has potential to drive customer engagement which, in turn, may lead to increased conversion rate as a result of delivering content related to the user. In most cases, when brands meet the needs of the customer, the customer is more likely to be drawn to the brand. This is the reason that personalization is crucial for marketers who are seeking to meet their targets and thrive in the omnichannel landscape. Most personalisation efforts are powered by third-party data. Marketers infer who customers are based on their browsing behavior. The use of third-party data assist advertisers to not only understand buyers on a personal level but also understand the effects of the advertising. Now with the phasing out of third-party cookies, this research paper aims to investigate if the third-party cookies restrictions will hamper advertising, and if advertisers will still be able to present personalised ads and content thereby maximizing the customer relationship.

Consumers today are more sophisticated than ever before. Consumers are acclimated to exploring the internet to locate what they need, with the bulk of buying taking place online for the first time. However, this means that each brand and ads must stand out.

1.6 Research questions

1. How will the discontinuation of third-party cookies impact the effectiveness and efficiency of online advertising?
2. In light of the imminent restrictions on retargeting, what strategies can digital marketers adopt to ensure the provision of personalized advertising while preserving the privacy of users?
3. What are the reactions of online advertisers to the elimination of third-party cookies, including the implementation of substitute technologies and modifications in advertising tactics.

1.7 Research objectives

- Determine the effect of the discontinuation of third-party cookies on the performance and productivity of online advertising.
- Identify the strategies that digital marketers can adopt in response to upcoming restrictions on retargeting to balance the delivery of personalized advertising and the protection of user privacy.
- Analyze the behavior of online advertisers in response to the blocking of third-party cookies, including the implementation of alternative technologies and changes in advertising practices.

1.8 Conceptualization

Key terms that will be used in the research are defined below:

1.8.1 Ad targeting

Ad targeting is a type of internet advertising that makes use of cookie-based technology to allow firms to reengage visitors who have left their website without purchasing something (Bianco, 2020). Research has shown that retargeting has become beneficial to marketers. Retargeting is used by brands and agencies to gain new consumers 56 percent of the time, 11 percent of the time to acquire customers from competitors, and 42 percent of the time to raise brand awareness, according to research (Loechner, 2014).

1.8.2 Personalised advertising

Personalized advertising, also referred to as targeted advertising, involves the creation of specific audiences in order to enhance the direct communication. This form of advertising typically segments audiences based on demographic characteristics and interests (Baglione & Tucci, 2018). Furthermore, digital advertisers can employ retargeting strategies to reach customers who have previously expressed an interest in their products or services, as well as creating lookalike audiences with similar interests (Geradin et al., 2020).

1.8.3 Data Privacy

Data privacy is defined as person's ability to choose when, how, and to what extent personal data about them is shared with or conveyed to others. This data enables businesses to target clients in real time, across devices and channels (Nawalade, 2018).

1.8.4 Cookies

Cookies, also referred to as HTTP, web, or browser cookies, are a technological tool that enables the tracking and storage of users' online behavior (Cahn et al., 2016). According to Cahn

et al. (2016) and Kristol (2001), cookies are small text files or messages that are passed from web servers to web browsers when a user visits a website. The web server creates a unique identifier based on the user's device IP number to track and store the user's interactions with the website. This allows the server to easily identify the user's device and gather information about their behavior on the website, which can be stored on the user's device for a specified period of time ranging from a few days to a year. As a result, cookies make it possible for websites to create detailed and enriched profiles for each individual user by remembering their previous visits and options.

1.8.4.1 First-party cookies

According to Guida (2021), first-party cookies refer to data that is generated and stored by the primary domain, allowing the domain to track user behavior exclusively on their own website. These cookies are typically perceived as being "beneficial" as they are designed to enhance the website and user experience (Cahn et al., 2016). Moreover, first-party cookies provide website owners with the ability to collect data for analytics, to retain login information, and to remember language settings (Kristol, 2001). Additionally, these cookies allow the website to save users' passwords or shopping carts if the user closes the website and returns at a later time (Cahn et al., 2016). Many e-commerce websites use first-party cookies to improve the functionality of shopping carts by recognizing users and thereby increasing customer satisfaction (Cahn et al., 2016).

1.8.4.2 Third-party cookies

In contrast, third-party cookies are created and stored by domains other than the website being visited by the user (Guida, 2021). These cookies enable companies to collect information about users when they are on websites other than their own, and to receive information about the

user even though they are not on the company's website (Berke & Calacci, 2022). This is a method that digital communicators can use to understand their audience and to target and retarget them (Berke & Calacci, 2022). For example, third-party cookies can be utilized for online advertising, cross-site tracking, or data analysis by collecting information about a user's behavior, location, or device (Cahn et al., 2016).

1.9. Structure of research report

1.9.1 Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth contextual framework for the present study, with a particular emphasis on its aims and objectives. The chapter offers an overview of the study's scope and subject matter.

1.9.2 Chapter 2 – Literature review

The current chapter is dedicated to elucidating the literature and theoretical underpinnings employed in the present study.

1.9.3 Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter will discuss the research methods employed in the study, detailing the researcher's approach. This chapter will also cover the ethical considerations associated with the study.

1.9.4 Chapter 4 – Data findings and analysis

This chapter will present the data that has been gleaned through the conducted research.

1.9.5 Chapter 5 – Conclusion and recommendations

In this chapter, the conclusions will be drawn from the findings of the study, with a rigorous analysis and discussion of the data. This is where pertinent recommendations will be proffered.

2. Conclusion

In the initial chapter of the research report, the study's contextual background, research aims and questions, problem statement, and purpose statement have been discussed. The following chapter will be dedicated to the literature review, which will be structured around the themes from the research objectives and questions and will also incorporate literature pertaining to the study's theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The following section focuses on literature derived from searches previously conducted. In this section, a review of the secondary research that already exists in relation to third-party cookies, personalised advertising, ad retargeting, consumer data privacy will be provided, and how they are used in online advertising sphere will be discussed, looking into issues of privacy and the overall effectiveness. The journals and research papers used in this literature review were published not earlier than 2002.

2.2 Organisational Change Management Strategies

Organizational change refers to the process through which an organization transitions from its existing state to a desired future state (Schwertner, 2017). According to Pierce et al. (2002), there are two distinct categories of organizational change: reactive and proactive. Reactive change occurs in response to internal or external pressures exerted on the organization, while proactive change is initiated by the organization itself (ibid). Moreover, various scholars distinguish between planned change (Cummings & Worley, 2000) and emergent change (Brandin & Larsson Ylipuranen, 2019). Planned change involves the organization's deliberate awareness of forthcoming transformations, prompting efforts to enhance current operational methods and increase adaptability to future alterations (Cummings & Worley, 2000).

2.2.1Theoretical Framework – ADKAR model

The theoretical model within which the research study has been set against is the ADKAR model. The ADKAR model was introduced in 2006 by Jeffrey M. Hiatt as a framework for identifying and addressing the key factors contributing to successful change in an organization.

The model encompasses five phases: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. In the Awareness stage, it is crucial to create awareness around the change and understand the reasons behind it and the risks associated with not acting. The Desire stage involves creating a willingness to change among leaders and employees, representing their motivation to change. The Knowledge stage is concerned with gaining the information needed to change, including education on change and understanding the responsibilities of employees in the change process. In the Ability stage, the acquired knowledge is translated into actions by employees demonstrating their understanding and capability to perform the change. Finally, the Reinforcement stage focuses on maintaining the change, including the internal and external factors necessary for sustainability. Although the model provides a useful framework, it has the drawback of primarily focusing on employees and non-complex change processes rather than larger, more complex organizations (Galli, 2018).

Since the study aims to evaluate the impact that blocking third-party cookies will have on the online advertising industry, the study employed the ADKAR model in addressing the challenges faced by online advertisers after the phasing out of third-party cookies on Google platform.

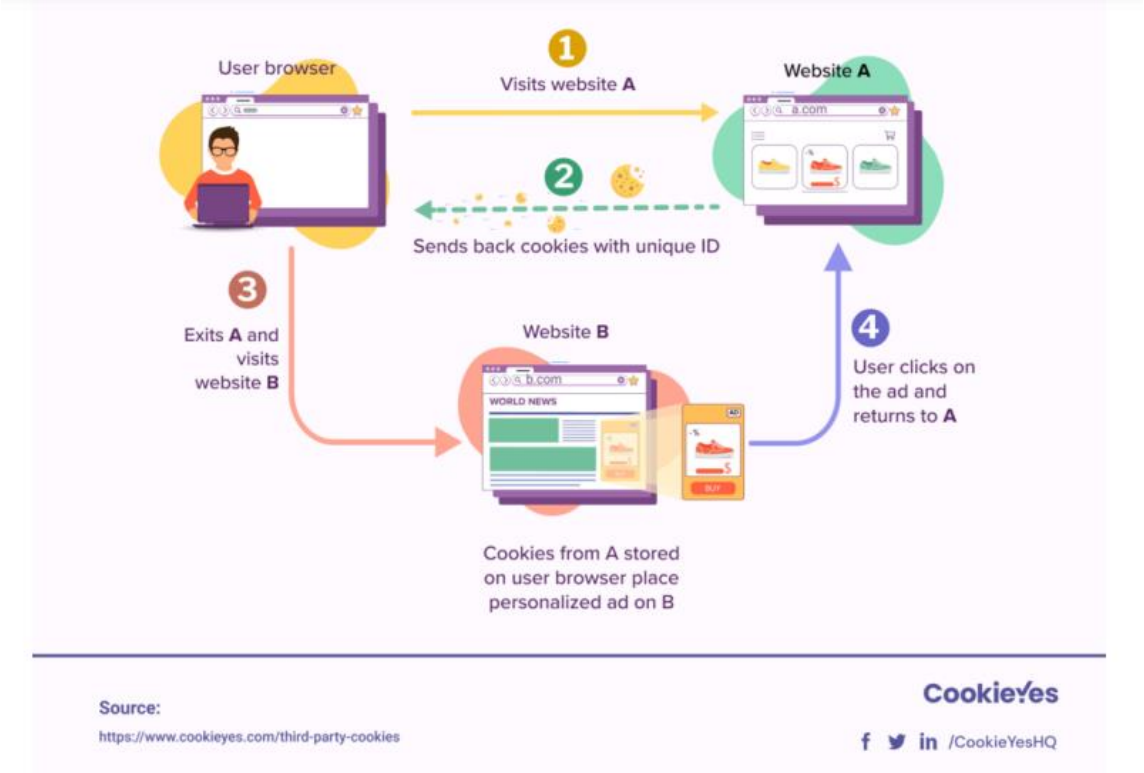
2.2.2 Change Management theory – The Positive Model

The selected organizational management model to assist in addressing the implications of third-party cookie deprecation is the positive model. This This approach entails adopting a positive perspective when examining organizational change and challenges, emphasizing the identification and enhancement of existing successful practices rather than focusing on deficiencies (Waddell et al., 2019). The model emphasizes leveraging organizational strengths and striving for excellence by studying exemplary approaches and utilizing existing capabilities to drive improvement and

achieve better results (ibid). Moreover, the model suggests that organizations should endeavor to uncover overarching themes, envision a desired future state, and subsequently formulate and implement strategies to realize that vision. Lastly, the model emphasizes the importance of perceiving organizational members as valuable data collectors and involving them as active participants in the change process (Cummings & Worley, 2000).

2.3 Retargeting

Third-party cookies can be utilized for the purpose of retargeting, which involves the display of advertisements to individuals who have previously visited a website but did not make a purchase (Sahni et al., 2019). When a user visits a website, it is possible for them to later receive ads from that website on unrelated sites, facilitated through the use of an ad network (ibid), and specifically, third-party cookies (PTS, 2019). An ad network is established by a company that links digital advertisers and websites that have agreed to serve as hosts for advertisements (Larson & Draper, 2021). On the user's previous visit to the website, cookies were placed in their browser, providing sufficient information for retargeting (ibid). When the user then visits another page within the ad network of the original site, the ad network identifies the user through the use of cookies and displays ads (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2013). For example, an advertisement for products that the user viewed but did not purchase may be displayed, aimed at encouraging the user to return and make a purchase, leading to revenue (ibid). It is important to note that the company responsible for retargeting is not capable of tracking the movements of their visitors on the internet, this function is performed by the ad network (Larson & Draper, 2021). A report detailing where the retargeted ads were displayed will be sent to the website, enabling analysis of browsing habits (ibid). To provide a visual representation of the retargeting process, an image of the digital phenomenon is included below (refer to Figure 1).



Adapted from Mussadiq, M. (2021, June 15). Third-Party Cookies: What Are They and Why Are They Going Away? CookieYes. https://www.cookieyes.com/blog/third-party-cookies/

The authors (Aziz and Telang, 2015) discovered that presenting an ad to an individual via online ad retargeting increased the likelihood of a purchase by 0.75 percent. The research has shown that ads that use third-party cookies have a small but significant beneficial influence on a user's likelihood of making a purchase, indicating that ad retargeting is effective (Aziz and Telang, 2015). Specifically, these advertisements are more successful for people who are more likely to buy. This emphasizes the significance for an advertiser to be able to recognize and target the users for whom adverts are most effective; in this way, more income can be created for the company, and consumers who have already expressed a strong desire to buy can benefit.

Beales (2010) confirms that advertisers have become more attracted to behavioral targeting and found it to be an effective model. The author found in his article that because the majority of network advertising money is spent procuring inventory from publishers, this could be that behavioral targeting is a crucial source of revenue for online content and service providers as well as third-party ad networks (Beales, 2010). Puri (2019) revealed that behaviorally targeted advertising is more than twice as effective as traditional run-of-network advertising at converting users who click on ads into buyers (6.8% conversion vs. 2.8 percent for run-of-network ads), and behavioral advertising accounts for roughly 18% of advertising revenue. Behaviorally focused advertising doubles revenue. Consumers often operate the internet on the assumption that it is free, but it is not.

2.4 Personalisation and personalized ads

In order to carry out effective marketing strategies, companies must have access to a significant amount of data. However, simply possessing a large quantity of data is not sufficient. The data must be linked to specific individuals in order to be valuable (Geradin et al., 2020). One method of identifying individuals from among the data is through the use of IP addresses or web cookies (Geradin et al., 2020; Sedvall, 2021). Third-party cookies, in particular, can facilitate the tracking of individuals across multiple websites and devices over time, allowing for personalized and targeted communication (Geradin et al., 2020). An even more efficient means of using third-party cookies for personalized advertising is through the application of programmatic advertising, an automated technology for purchasing advertising spots (Palos-Sanchez et al., 2019). Programmatic advertising not only increases the financial efficiency of marketing, but also allows for a greater degree of user-based marketing through the use of AI technology to ensure that advertisements are displayed to relevant customers (ibid). According to Geradin et al. (2020) and

Guida (2021), third-party cookies play a crucial role in the current online advertising landscape as the primary identifier, enabling the creation of user profiles, personalized advertisements, and tracking the effectiveness of advertising efforts. Vlasic and Kesic (2007) define personalization as the process of establishing and maintaining long-term profitable relationships between businesses and consumers based on mutual understanding and cognition, as well as the concept of added value. The brand personalizes all part of the relationship with a customer, including marketing communication, product, price, and location, in such relationships. According to the authors, personalization can help brands with tight budgets lower bounce rates and improve other important online KPIs. In her research, the author state that deep customization can greatly enhance ROI and consumers who viewed tailored material on each of the three sites had a 100% higher conversion rate than those who saw non-personalized information. Furthermore, the cart linked with the personalized shopper journey was 74% higher than the cart associated with the generic pages (Vlasic and Kesic, 2007). This enhanced experience might mean the difference between a viewer becoming a customer and bouncing to a competitor's site.

2.5 Consumer Data Privacy

The topic of privacy concerns in the online arena has gained significant attention in recent years, with research indicating a high degree of discomfort among consumers regarding being tracked online and having targeted advertisements displayed on websites other than the one they are currently visiting (Geradin et al., 2020; Wahlund et al., 2016). In response to growing concerns about individualized tracking and privacy online, various web browsers have taken steps to regulate the use of third-party cookies (Berke & Calacci, 2022; Martin & Murphy, 2016). This move can be viewed as a reaction to the increasing prevalence of third-party cookies and personalization in online browsing experiences. In opposition, other studies indicate that if

consumers feel empowered in controlling the information they share and comprehend how it can be advantageous to them, they tend to be more willing to provide data (Martin & Murphy, 2016). As a result, one approach to reducing privacy concerns involves implementing stronger individual and regulatory control mechanisms. Bianco (2020) uncovered that most customers have negative sentiments about retargeted advertising and programmatic companies that employ third-party cookies. According to the survey conducted by the author, 71% of participants believe that Google's decision will benefit them in terms of increased privacy, and 77% believe that it will benefit the programmatic ecosystem in terms of discovering new, more efficient advertising tactics. Google has announced that it will combine previously obtained consumer data from websites such as Google Plus, Google Search, and YouTube to create a more personalized and customized advertising experience (Angwin, 2012). Data monetization via targeted adverts is the process of turning customer data into cash by tracking their online activity, browsing behavior, and the types of products they've searched for, among other things. This exercise can be seen used by organizations such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, Gmail, and other free websites to generate cash (Angwin, 2012).

As of the current moment, both Safari, the browser developed by Apple, and Firefox, created by Mozilla, have implemented a prohibition on these cookies upon request (Mendys & Jensen, 2021; Pidgeon, 2021). In 2017, Apple introduced the Intelligent Tracking Prevention version 2.2 (ITP2.2), followed by the implementation of Mozilla's Firefox Enhanced Tracking Protection (ETP) in 2019. Additionally, Google has announced its plan to remove third-party cookies from its Chrome browser in 2023, which is expected to have a significant impact on online advertising as Chrome is currently the most widely used browser (Mendys & Jensen, 2021). However, Guida (2021) posits that the cessation of third-party cookie utilization does not

necessarily signify the end of effective advertising and that alternative strategies should be considered and adopted, particularly within the advertising industry. Moreover, in the face of organizational change, such as the elimination of third-party cookies, it is crucial to engage in discussions and implement change strategies to accommodate the transition (Skog, 2019).

2.6 The future of cookie-less online advertising

It has been acknowledged by Mendys and Jensen (2021) that the future of digital marketing is heading towards a scenario devoid of third-party cookies, a development precipitated by the actions of companies such as Apple, Mozilla, and Google. This presents significant challenges for marketers, as new approaches and alternatives are necessary to compensate for the absence of third-party cookies (Bleier et al., 2021; Juškaitė & Janušauskaitė, 2021; Mendys & Jensen, 2021). Although a limited number of solutions have been proposed at present, some new strategies have been discussed in literature (ibid). According to Juškaitė and Janušauskaitė (2021), Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is poised to become one of the most crucial digital marketing strategies in the aftermath of the disappearance of third-party cookies. The objective of SEO is to improve a website's organic position on the Search Engine Results Page (SERP), thereby increasing traffic to the site. This is achieved by optimizing the web content of a website, so that it appears at the top of the search engine results when a user enters a relevant keyword. As a result, the website with the best optimized content will receive higher visits and revenue. The authors also suggest that the re-introduction of contextual advertising will be a relevant strategy (ibid). Contextual advertising refers to the display of ads in a context that is relevant to the target audience, rather than targeting users based on their behavioral profiles (Inoyatillo, 2020). For example, if a user visits a website featuring recipes, they may be shown ads related to food and cooking.

Moreover, Juškaitė and Janušauskaitė (2021) suggest that companies with the capability should begin to rely more heavily on their first-party data and build their strategies around it. The utilization of a company's first-party data involves collecting first-party cookies from its own website and customers' behaviors to create personalized advertising (Long, 2022). This approach is considered to be more efficient than relying on third-party cookies from a privacy standpoint, as the data collected is more anonymous and targeting is based on usage behavior rather than individual user information. Additionally, first-party data is usually stored and organized in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems (ibid). However, Mendys and Jensen (2021) emphasize that a well-established IT department or experts are required for businesses to effectively focus on first-party data and CRM systems. Another solution discussed by Bleier et al. (2021) is the creation of walled gardens by firms. A significant proportion of digital marketers utilize third-party cookies to perform comprehensive data analysis and devise effective strategies (Bump, 2021). Companies that identify as walled gardens keep their technology, user data, and information exclusively for themselves without any involvement or accessibility from outside parties (Mehra, 2011). Examples of walled gardens include Meta and Google, whereas the opposite of these closed ecosystems is an open community where an organization's data is accessible to external users (ibid). However, this approach requires advanced analytics capabilities that smaller firms may not have the capacity for (Bleier et al., 2021; Kelleher & Nelson, 2020). In addition, broader solutions suggest that digital marketers should focus on a more comprehensive marketing strategy, such as engaging heavily in social media, continuously building their brand, and remembering that the landscape of paid advertising is constantly evolving (Juškaitė & Janušauskaitė, 2021). In response to the shift away from third-party cookies, Google has proposed the Privacy Sandbox as a solution (The Privacy Sandbox, 2022). The objective of this initiative is

to balance the privacy concerns of users with the need to provide valuable data to advertisers. Although the Privacy Sandbox is still undergoing development and changes (Mendys & Jensen, 2021), Google has introduced the Topics API as a means of maintaining user privacy while presenting relevant advertisements. The API will not allow user information to be shared across websites through third-party cookies and will enable users to see the topics they are connected to and control their privacy settings in Chrome (The Privacy Sandbox, 2022).

2.7 Conclusion

The literature showed that to compensate for online marketing inefficiencies, data-driven engagement and personalised advertising can provide the necessary increases in user engagement metrics. Despite consumer's belief that technology has a good impact on their lives, most consumers are concerned that the data firms collect on them could be detrimental, and they believe their data is worth more than the free services they receive in return. The growing use of intent data shows that marketers are enthused about what it can do; reveal who is actively looking for a solution and what topics they are likely interested in. However, if intent data is not used correctly, it will fail to produce results. Customer interactions that are personalized are critical to business, but data privacy scandals and restrictions make obtaining that information more challenging.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm

A paradigm is defined as "a cluster of beliefs and dictates which scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, and how results should be interpreted" (Bryman and Bell, 2011: p48). The main concern of the research paradigm is the uniqueness of a circumstance, which contributes to the overarching goal of contextual depth (Maree, 2016). Interpretivism paradigm includes the promotion of the value of qualitative data in pursuit of knowledge and its important in providing contextual depth (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). Therefore, as this research aims to obtain an understanding of the world from the individual's (marketers, advertisers, digital agencies) perspective and experience, the study has taken an interpretivism approach to a qualitative study. The researcher selected the interpretivist paradigm as it will assist the researcher in gaining insights into how the online advertising will be impacted by the restrictions of third-party cookies and how the online practitioners view this change. Ontological assumptions of interpretivism will be implemented. These assumptions are of the belief that reality is subjective and that more often an individual's understating of reality reflect their own perspective (du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014). The study's ontological assumptions aim to discover digital marker's response attitude towards the demise of third-party cookies and how According to du Plooy-Cilliers (2014), the epistemological viewpoint of interpretivism is that people are governed by their common sense in their daily lives. Facts are contained in a meaning system that is dependent on how people interpret and contextualize data. This study's epistemological assumption is that the marketers and advertisers have first-hand experience and since their day-to-day work involved dealing with third-party cookies.

The interpretivism metatheoretical assumption aims to expose the meanings of people who have been examined to better comprehend the people who are directly involved in the occurrence (du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014). Others don't have to agree with the researcher's claims all the time. In most cases, interpretivism theory offers a story. As a result, the ideas are employed to assist the researcher in comprehending the experiences and reality of others (du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014). The meta-theoretical assumption for this study is in attempting to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the study by employing the online behavioral advertising framework. As a result, the study's approach relied on subjective qualitative methods, including the use of thematic content analysis.

3.2 Research approach

To achieve the set objectives, qualitative research methods are appropriate for analyzing and addressing questions about why and how humans behave , opinion, and experience (Babbie and Mouton, 2017). This approach collects information that would be hard to gather through quantitatively methods. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people view the world and how their experiences and opinions shape them (Babbie and Mouton, 2017). “Through such research we can analyze the various factors which motivate people to behave in a particular manner or which make people like or dislike a particular thing” (Kothari, 2004: p54). In this research, information regarding brand’s experiences, feelings, values and perceptions of online advertising and personalised ads will be evaluated. Therefore, qualitative research is best suited method for acquiring this sort of information. Quantitative research, on the other, is based on the measurement of quantity or amount with the approach to measuring and testing, and a structured manner in data collection (Kothari, 2004). It is applicable to phenomena that can be expressed in terms of quantity. Since this study is not aimed at quantifying data or measuring variables, quantitative method will not be applicable in this research.

3.3 Research design

The aim of the research is to understand the impacts that will be caused by the phasing out of third-party towards online advertising strategies and if brands can still connect and form relationships with customers after relying on third-party cookies to collect and use online consumer data for personalization, attribution, and performance tracking in their online advertising efforts. Since the research attempt to gain insight into human behavior, opinions, and experiences, the study takes of the explanatory research design. Explanatory studies assist in gaining understanding in a particular situation, a phenomenon, a community, or person (Blaikie, 2000). This research only focused on the single event and organization – that of third-party cookies being phased out on the Google platform and not any other online publishers or search engines such as Safari or Firefox. This research report will explore the responses of digital marketers on the impact of the discontinuation of third-party cookies on their marketing strategies and the negative impact of it.

3.4 Population and sampling

Population

The present study employed purposive sampling as the sampling technique. This was done with the intention of selecting a sample (consisting of a defined sample size and participants) that would accurately represent a particular phenomenon, location, or type based on a key criterion (Babbie and Mouton, 2017). The target population for the research was comprised of online advertisers and paid media professionals. This particular population was selected as the focus of the study because they have had previous or ongoing experience using the Google platform in their advertising strategies. The objective of this study is to explore the impact of the phasing out of

third-party cookies on the online marketing activities of these individuals, with a specific focus on the effects on retargeting and the delivery of personalized advertisements.

3.5.2 Sampling

In this study, a non-probability sampling technique was utilized to identify and select the appropriate subjects and participants. The researcher chose these techniques since it does not represent all members of the population but only those participants with characteristic are selected (Strydom, 2011:231). Non-probability sampling covers a wide range of types of sampling strategies, these are: accidental, convenience, purposive, quota, snowball, and volunteer (Bryman and Bell, 2014). A purposive sample is one which is available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility, and it is cost-effective and time-effective to conduct (Cant, 2010). Under the purposive sampling, there are various sampling technique which includes critical care, expert, extreme case, homogeneous, maximum variation, total population, typical case sampling (Laerd, 2022).

In this study, the researcher employed a purposeful sampling approach, specifically utilizing expert purposive sampling, in the selection of marketers and advertisers. This was done with the intention of including only individuals with expertise in the online advertising space, as opposed to the entire marketing domain. A sample of 8 individuals was selected from the population, comprising of digital marketing professionals across various industries and at different levels of expertise. The sample selection was not limited by specific age or gender criteria, thus both men and women, as well as people of all races and cultures were eligible to participate. The individuals held a range of roles within the digital marketing domain, including positions such as performance managers, SEO specialists, account managers, digital campaign managers, and search managers.

The participant selected possessed a minimum of five years of experience in the field of online advertising. The objective was to attain a comprehensive understanding and insights from this specific group, given their involvement in online advertising. The participants were acting in their personal capacity and did not serve as representatives of the organizations they were affiliated with. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding, the sample was intended to include individuals with diverse roles and years of experience. Additional details about the participants is provided below.

Table of participants

	Work title	**Total number of years' experience in the digital marketing field**
1	Senior Digital Strategist	15
2	Media Planner	12
3	SEO Specialist	7
4	Online Search Manager	8
5	Data Analyst	8
6	Performance Marketing Specialist	6
7	Paid Media Specialist	6
8	Google Paid Media Specialist	10

3.5 Data collection

In-depth interviews were the preferred a method for data collection. The utilization of in-depth interviews as a method for data collection was deemed beneficial for this research as it facilitated the provision of participant suggestions, individual perceptions, and insights (Strydom and Bezuidenhout, 2014). Furthermore, this approach enabled the researcher to clarify certain questions while also affording a degree of flexibility and freedom in the questioning process. The study conducted 8 interviews. The participants were recruited through email invitations, and the interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams during the month of December 2022.

Individuals who responded affirmatively were subsequently provided with further details. The interview was made up of open-ended questions. A recording device was used to record the interview so that the researcher is able to analyze any missed points during the process. The duration of each interview was around 40 minutes. The researcher can be classified as a primary field research as the collection of information was first-hand. Secondary data was also collected using secondary data sources such as industry reports.

3.6 Data analysis

The research employed the method of thematic content analysis to interpret the data collected. Thematic content analysis places more emphasizes on pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns or themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Miles and Huberman (1994) describe qualitative analysis as a continuous, iterative process that consists of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. The study utilized the method of thematic analysis employing the Miles and Huberman approach to reduce the data collected into manageable and comprehensible texts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive and organized interpretation of the data. The following process has been applied in analyzing the data. In the first step, the researcher transcribed the raw data collected from the interview and questionnaire by using test headings from the interviews and main headings. The second step included sorting and sifting through the materials to identify similar phrases, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences (Babbie and Mouton, 2017). In this step the researcher isolated the patterns and processes, commonalities, and differences, and taking them out (Babbie and Mouton, 2017); gradually elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies discerned in the literature review; and confronting those generalizations with a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories

(Babbie and Mouton, 2017). If the quotes agree with the literature review; the researcher would pull through relevant quotes from the literature to prove this. If it did not agree, the researcher would also show quotes showing this and in both situations try and explain why the quotes validate or invalidate the literature. In the third step, the researcher identified any unexpected findings and explained why each finding is unexpected. The fourth step, the researcher explains the relevance of the findings in the context of the research by answering the so what. So, what does this mean for the researcher or what is the relevance of this finding for the research. In the final step, the researcher drew conclusions from the findings say whether they answer the research questions or not. Based on the key insights, the researcher will be able to make recommendations.

3.7 Trustworthiness

The key criterion or principle of good qualitative research is found in the notion of trustworthiness: neutrality of its findings or decisions (Lincoln and Guba 1985 as cited by Babbie and Mouton, 2017). Within qualitative research, the aspects of trustworthiness can be divided into credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

3.7.1 Credibility

To ensure credibility, the researcher made use of open-ended questions in which the participants gave more information and feedback to the questions until data saturation occurs.

3.7.2 Transferability

The findings and conclusions of this study could be applicable to other digital marketing contexts or situations. The insights and strategies have the potential to offer internet users valuable insights and knowledge regarding the utilization of third-party cookies, the anticipated impact of regulations on the collection of user information by advertisers, and the potential future solutions that may emerge in the realm of personalized advertising during online browsing. If digital

marketers in another industry or region encounter a comparable challenge of adjusting to the elimination of third-party cookies, they have the opportunity to utilize the insights and strategies uncovered in this study to guide their own practices. The study's findings can provide them with valuable information regarding the obstacles, approaches, and alternative strategies that can be adopted to address the evolving landscape of personalized advertising.

3.7.3 Dependability

In order to ensure proficiency in data collection and diligence in data analysis, the researcher kept a reflexive journal to record reflections, insights, and interpretations throughout the research process. This assisted in reaching transparency, enabled critical self-reflection, and supported the dependability of the study. The researcher employed a systematic analysis techniques, which is thematic analysis for constant comparison. This involved organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships.

3.7.4 Confirmability

In this study, several steps were taken to ensure confirmability. Data triangulation: The study used multiple sources of data, including interviews with digital marketing experts and relevant literature, to triangulate and cross-validate the findings. This approach helps reduce individual biases and increases the reliability of the results. Detailed documentation: The researcher maintained a detailed documentation of the research process, including the steps followed, decisions made, and any changes or modifications. This documentation allows for transparency and enables other researchers to assess the dependability of the study. Peer review: The study findings were reviewed and validated by peers and other researchers in the field. This external review helped to ensure the objectivity and confirmability of the research by critically evaluating the methods, data analysis, and interpretations.

3.8 Pretesting

In order to practice and assess the structure of the interview, as well as estimate the required time, a pilot interview was conducted prior to the main interviews, in accordance with recommendations by Bryman (2018) and Esaiasson et al. (2017). This pilot interview provided an opportunity to reflect on the interview questions and guide structure, resulting in minor modifications such as clarification of certain questions and reordering of the questions.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Following the ethical clearance protocol proposed by the institution (Wits Business School), the researcher obtained the approval of the study prior to commencing with participant recruitment and data collection. (Appendix A: Permission letter and ethical clearance). The interest of research participants is to be protected for research to be conducted in an ethical manner (Sauders and Lewis, 2012). As such, a compulsory opening statement that requested agreement to continue with the interview was included. This statement informed the participants of the purpose of the interview, its duration, their voluntarily participation and the confidential nature of the study**.** Refer to Appendix B for the informed consent form. To ensure free will participation**,** respondents were requested to engage in the study voluntarily and were informed that they have the option to refuse (Graziano and Raulin, 2000:65). The participants' identities was kept anonymous, and any information they contribute will be kept private. Participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any moment if they do not wish to continue (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). To acknowledge the work of others and avoid plagiarism, the researcher will provide references in the paper. Following Leedy and Ormrod's guidelines, the study's findings shall be communicated in a thorough and honest manner, with no misrepresentations of the findings (2005).

3.10 Conclusion

The present chapter outlined the research methodology and design used in this study. A qualitative research approach was selected and described, along with the data production techniques employed. The study's population and sample were identified and elaborated upon. Additionally, the researcher addressed the trustworthiness and obtained ethical clearance. The following chapter will examine the research outcomes.

CHAPTER 4: DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the results of interviews conducted with eight digital marketers are presented. Additionally, the chapter includes discussions that are related to existing literature. The findings and data analysis are aimed at supporting the researcher's sentiments on the topic. This means that they are aimed at supporting the three research questions posed in chapter one, namely:

1. How will the discontinuation of third-party cookies impact the effectiveness and efficiency of online advertising?
2. In light of the imminent restrictions on retargeting, what strategies can companies adopt to ensure the provision of personalized advertising while preserving the privacy of users?
3. What are the reactions of online advertisers to the elimination of third-party cookies, including the implementation of substitute technologies and modifications in advertising tactic?

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic content analysis to explore respondents' opinions in light of the interview questions. Refer to Appendix C for an example of the interview transcript. The full interview transcripts are kept under lock and key/password protected flash drive accessible only by the researcher, congruent with ethics protocol guidelines Following the approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), the first step involved transcribing, reading, and re-reading the interviews to gain familiarity with the data. This step also involved noting down initial ideas from the interviews to get a sense of the main themes in each transcription. In the second step, the initial coding process began, and the entire data collection was reviewed to determine the amount of data reduction required and to gather relevant data for the study. This process was conducted using Google docs, where all transcripts were categorized into predetermined themes presented in

each question below. Feedback from each of the responded were then coded. The next section details the major themes that emerged from the responses as well as outlier responses.

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Interview question 1: Do you clearly understand the potential impact on your marketing strategies once third-party cookies are no longer supported by any major web browser – Google Chrome in particular.

Themes	Frequency	Verbatim quote
Audience targeting Challenges First-party data Innovation	4 3 3 3	"It will have a big impact, so far we've been able to target specific audiences, we won't be able to do it as easily as we could do it before, it will make it quite difficult."

Most participants confirmed that there were aware of the change and the significant effect it will have towards their work. The Performance Marketing Manager mentioned that the discontinuation of third-party cookies would have a negative impact on their marketing strategies. The respondents raise concerns about the potential loss of personalized targeting, reduced ad effectiveness, and the inability to measure the effectiveness of their campaigns accurately. Regarding the negative impact, the respondents mentioned that the loss of third-party cookies would make it harder for them to understand their target audience, resulting in less effective targeting and fewer conversions. Also, the inability to track user behavior across devices would limit their ability to optimize their campaigns effectively. Furthermore, the inaccuracy to measure the effectiveness of their campaigns will make it harder to justify marketing budgets. On the other hand, other respondents claimed that some of the google campaigns are not critically dependent on third-party cookies. For example, the Google Paid Media Specialist explained that the removal

of third-party cookies is unlikely to have a direct impact on the search results. However, it could impact the types of ads such as Google display and Google responsive.

Unique findings

In contrast, a few respondents indicated that they did not view the elimination of third-party cookies as having a negative effect in their role of work. The SEO Specialist expresses that while third-party cookies have been a useful tool for tracking and targeting consumers, there are other methods available that can be used to reach our target audience.

The respondent pointed out that they could rely on first-party data, such as data collected from own website, to better understand customer behavior and preferences. Tactics such as contextual advertising could be used, where users are targeted based on the content they are currently viewing, rather than on their browsing history. Another respondent, the Online Search Manager, highlighted that the shift away from third-party cookies presents an opportunity for marketers to be more transparent and ethical in their data collection practices. With more emphasis on privacy and consent, they are able to build better relationships with customers by providing them with a better understanding of how their data is being used. The responded had a positive outlook and pointed out that although the phasing out of third-party cookies will require some adjustments, the shift will ultimately result in a more ethical and effective approach to marketing.

4.1.2 Interview question 2: **With this shift, do you think the digital landscape is changing for the better or worse? Please explain your choice of selection.**

Themes	Frequency	Verbatim quote
Difficult Adaptability Revenue Innovation	4 3 3 3	"I do believe it will change for the better. However, the transition may not be as smooth as we would like. Most African companies are not yet equipped with artificial intelligence to smoothly transition into this new digital era."

Most participants mentioned that the digital landscape is changing for the better. The Performance Marketing Manager explained that the regulation of third-party cookies has compelled advertisers to enhance their ability to craft messages that are more pertinent and visually engaging. Consequently, these professionals are now required to rely less on extensive data sets to accurately target their desired customer base. The specialist further explained that audience targeting will now be done in a more refined and less wastage manner. Several respondents expressed concern that the aforementioned shift could potentially have an adverse impact on revenue. Specifically, these respondents noted that the majority of the digital agencies they are associated with rely on targeted ads provided by third-party sources to generate over 80% of their advertising revenue. They alluded that this change could potentially create an uneven playing field for small-scale advertisers to contend with their more sizable counterparts who possess greater resources to create alternate means of tracking. The greatest concern amongst the participants is the transition process of this industry shift, and if organization will be able to acquire appropriate technology and infrastructure. Overall, the sentiment amongst the participants is that it's still too early to say exactly how things will play out, and there could be more changes and innovations in the coming years as advertisers and tech companies adapt to the new reality of a cookie-less web.

Unique findings

Amongst others, one participant mentioned they acknowledge this shift as a catalyst for enhancing their innovative capabilities in problem-solving. Notably, the Senior Digital Strategist observed that the conventional approach to ads targeting had made digital marketers complacent. However, with the implementation of the change, they will be compelled to explore alternative, more creative strategies, thereby presenting a significant challenge that demands the pursuit of innovative solutions.

4.1.3 **Interview question 3: Customers want a personalized experience but also want their data to be respected – do you think this is something that can be done.**

Themes	Frequency	Verbatim quote
First-party data Manage cookies Zero-party data	4 3 3	"In the future, over the next 5 - 10 years, we're going to get people who are more concerned with their privacy more than ever"

Most respondents agree that it is possible to respect customer data privacy while still providing a personalized experience, and this can be achieved through transparent data practices, appropriate data security measures, and customer empowerment. For example, the Online Search Manager mention that there is a growing trend among consumers to be more deliberate in the selection of data that they choose to disclose, and this is growing year by year. The participant mention that it's crucial to be transparent about what data is being collected and how it will be used. It is important that companies offer customers the ability to manage their own data, including the option to opt-out of data collection or request deletion of their data. By empowering customers with control over their data, companies can build trust and strengthen the customer relationship.

In addition, the SEO Specialist argues that customers should be given the option to opt-out of cookie collection if they wish. The participant pointed out that the current option for managing cookie preferences has been identified as lengthy, complex process and potentially challenging for digital consumers to comprehend. As a result, consumers may ultimately choose to accept all cookies compromising their personal data. The participant mention such as including a lead form and the use of first party data as this allows for proper consent from the customer can be used in a way that respects customer data privacy while still providing a personalized experience. The Performance Marketing Manager mention that in order to achieve this balance, there need to be a limit of data collection to what is necessary for the personalized experience and not retain data for longer than necessary. The participant mention that throughout the surveys conducted, consumers are reluctant to share their data in exchange for transactions that they perceive as being of lesser importance and these various between industries. Consumers are more willing to share data with healthcare and financial services than with companies in media entertainment or retail. Thus, the establishment of trust varies among industries, with some industries facing greater challenges than others in collecting data from consumers.

Unique findings

In contrast, the Media Planner mention that this can also be achieved through the use of zero-first-party data. Although first-party and third-party data are cookie-based, zero-party data is obtained directly and voluntarily from customers. The respondents suggests that by requesting a direct response from customers, collecting zero-party data presents a chance for digital marketers to create a direct relationship with consumers, and consequently improve their marketing efforts. Furthermore, it can enhance transparency and establish confidence among users, which is not always achievable with first-party data. Zero-party data is frequently regarded as the most

trustworthy and valuable type of customer data. This type of information is shared directly by the customers with the brand, usually in exchange for a valuable offer or benefit. Examples of zero-party data include customer surveys, gated form fills, newsletter signups, and loyalty program preferences.

4.1.4 Interview question 4: Would your key media and marketing partners need to have viable solutions in place that are privacy compliant? (in support of this shift)

Themes	Frequency	Verbatim quote
- Adoptability - Contextual advertising	3 3	"media and marketing partners and agencies should adopt privacy-compliant solutions to ensure that their advertising strategies are aligned with the privacy laws and regulations."

The Digital Marketing Specialist stated that it will be crucial for key media and marketing partners to have viable solutions in place that are privacy compliant. With the increasing customers concerns over data privacy and security, the respondents express that digital agencies will need to comply with the regulations and laws related to data privacy. Another respondent, the Senior Digital Strategist supports this statement and states that failure to comply with these regulations can lead to legal consequences, financial penalties, and could ultimately damage to the reputation of the company. More respondents agree that media partners will be required to modify their advertising strategy by shifting from targeted to contextual advertising. Rather than depending on cookies to deliver ads in accordance with the user's browsing history and demographics, the Performance Marketing Specialist suggests that contextual advertising is one of the viable solutions that media partners will need to put in place to support this shift. The respondent explains that the relevance of an ad to the viewer in contextual advertising is determined by the context of

the webpage or app on which the ad is placed. Furthermore, this method is capable of efficiently targeting the appropriate audience without requiring personal data or the use of cookies.

Another viable solution considered by the SEO specialist is the utilization of search engine optimization (SEO) to augment organic web traffic. Juškaitė and Janušauskaitė (2021) provide a definition of SEO as a process intended to enhance the visibility and ranking of websites in search engines like Google, through the optimization of relevant keywords associated with the site. The SEO specialist suggest that media partners will need this solution as it focuses on keywords and topic optimization, which will ensure that the website content is relevant and useful to their target audience. This can help improve the website's search engine rankings and increase organic traffic.

The Senior Digital strategist suggested that there should be a greater emphasis on generating compelling and creative content. In addition to considering server-side as a prospective solution, the responded expounded on the impact of third-party cookie regulations on marketers, which has compelled them to improve their ability to create more pertinent messages and visually engaging stories, rather than relying solely on extensive data sets to identify their target audience. Additionally, the respondent noted that although the regulation may pose difficulties in identifying the target audience, it could potentially have a favorable impact on the advertising industry as a whole. He further asserted that traditional marketing, when implemented appropriately in conjunction with creative content, would probably experience growth.

Furthermore, zero-party is another viable solution which has been recommended to provide valuable insights into customer interests, preferences, and future purchase intentions, thereby shedding light on their motivations. However, to encourage customer engagement and address concerns about data collection, companies must offer a value exchange. For instance, incorporating rewards into questionnaires can incentivize customers to share their data willingly.

The Senior Digital Strategist suggest that in order to thrive in the rapidly changing environment such as, it's essential for media partners to remain up to date with the best practices and to be adaptable. The respondent suggest that it is essential for media partners to remain current with industry advancements and trends, trial new technologies and approaches, and also having the willingness to embrace change. However, it is also crucial to maintain focus on the fundamental goals and values of one's brand. The media planner supports this and confirms that this approach will effectively position a brand to differentiate itself from its competitors and foster genuine, enduring relationships with its customer base.

4.2 Discussion

The following section will analyses and discuss the results that have been presented earlier. From the results obtained, there is a discrepancy comprehension among individuals, with a significant proportion of the digital marketers having a negative perspective of the regulation while others have a positive perspective. While the news of the regulation is likely to have reached everyone, a comprehensive understanding of its implications is lacking. Although the level of awareness varied among the participants, the general consensus was that those who anticipated being impacted by the elimination of third-party cookies expressed a willingness to adapt to the change. Despite acknowledging the potential difficulties associated with the transition, these individuals exhibited a positive attitude towards the regulation and recognized the significance of maintaining user privacy and data integrity.

Cahn et al. (2016) state that the primary purpose of utilizing third-party cookies is to facilitate online advertising, cross-site tracking, retargeting, or gathering user behavior data, which aligns with the majority of respondents' descriptions of their main usage. For instance, the Performance Marketing Manager description of tracking website visitors to determine their

previous online activity could be considered a form of cross-site tracking (Cahn et al., 2016). Moreover, the use of third-party cookies for generating performance metrics and devising marketing strategies aligns with existing literature on the subject (Bump, 2021). Furthermore, the utilization of third-party cookies for targeting, as described by the respondents, could be categorized as the creation of personalized browser experiences (Bailey et al., 2019), enabling communicators to gain a better understanding of their audience (Berke & Calacci, 2022).

Previous research has asserted the significance of third-party cookies in online marketing and their crucial role in enabling personalized advertising, as noted by Larson and Draper (2021) and Larsson (2020). However, the findings of the current study do not entirely align with this perspective. Although a portion of the participants expressed their substantial reliance on third-party cookies, the majority reported that they do not depend on them significantly. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents acknowledged the efficiency and convenience that third-party cookies offer in their work processes, despite not relying on them heavily.

Guida (2021) argues that the elimination of third-party cookies would have negative effects on businesses, as these cookies play a crucial role in collecting user data pertaining to their customers. The present study aligns with this, as the findings indicate that that the removal of third-party cookies affects all digital marketers. The findings suggest that one of the most significant consequences of this removal is the difficulty in gathering enough data to create personalized advertising and retargeting, which is consistent with the views of Guida (2021) and Berke and Calacci (2022), who have noted that third-party cookies are frequently employed to target and retarget audiences. Furthermore, the respondents' concern about not being able to exclude users from viewing inappropriate ads aligns with Guida's (2021) assertion that third-party cookies ensure that ads are personalized and presented to the relevant customers

To summarize, the impact of the elimination of third-party cookies on personalized advertising varies across different digital platforms and different roles. Bleier et al. (2021) and Johnson et al. (2020) suggest that small businesses with limited digital expertise are likely to be more affected than larger companies due to their heavy reliance on third-party cookies and limited resources to adapt. However, the findings of this investigation propose that certain digital positions in digital marketing won't be impacted, and for those that might face significant consequences, there appear to be workable solutions available. Other factors such as the roles' dependence on third-party cookies and technical focus also play a significant role. For instance, roles that are involved in a wide range of digital remarketing services and are not niche or lack a strong technical focus may be more affected. This study highlights the complexity of the issue and the need to consider multiple factors when evaluating the impact of the elimination of third-party cookies on personalized advertising.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

The following chapter serves to conclude the research findings and emphasize the significance of this study's contributions, specifically in relation to its aims, research questions and limitations. Additionally, recommendations are put forward based on the research results.

Based on the analysis, it is now possible to answer the first research question regarding how will the discontinuation of third-party cookies impact the effectiveness and efficiency of online advertising. The collected data shows that this regulation will have significant impact on digital marketers in this study and their marketing strategies. The removal of the regulation is expected to have a considerable impact on the ability to create successful personalized advertising and retargeting that effectively targets the intended audience, which is one of the primary factors identified. In addition, the elimination of third-party cookies will also have an impact on the capacity to scrutinize customer behavior due to a reduction in the amount of user data available for analysis. Moreover, there will be an added difficulty in assessing the effects of marketing campaigns and performance metrics. However, most respondents reported that they were prepared for the phasing out of third-party cookies, although some discrepancies were noted among the different roles within digital marketing. While some marketers had taken proactive measures and started communicating about the regulations upon the release of the first guidelines by Safari and Firefox, others were still awaiting further information or planning to address the issue after the complete removal of third-party cookies. The process of finding new solutions to address the changes is an essential component of change strategies, with some respondents already having

identified alternative solutions, while others were discussing potential solutions or waiting for more information.

In regard to answering the second research question about what strategies can companies adopt to ensure the provision of personalized advertising while preserving the privacy of users. It can be concluded that in the short term, digital marketers may need to focus more heavily on first-party data collection and contextual advertising to serve targeted ads. These can involve using methods such as the zero-party data to collect user data directly from website forms and surveys, as well as using machine learning and other technologies to analyze website content and serve ads based on that content. More respondents agree that there is a growing trend among marketers to prioritize establishing first-party relationships with their customers by means of email marketing, social media, or other platforms that enable direct communication and data collection with the customers' explicit consent. By cultivating trust and offering value to their customers, marketers can earn their patronage and establish a more personalized and meaningful connection with them. Additionally, the respondents pointed out that the quantity of ads displayed to users will remain unchanged following the elimination of third-party cookies. However, it appears that the ads will be less customized. Consequently, it raises an intriguing inquiry as to whether users prefer more irrelevant advertisements due to user integrity concerns or if they are willing to share information to receive more relevant ads. The study's results indicate that users are aware of and desire solutions that prioritize privacy while remaining efficient in digital marketing, which may obviate the need to compromise on the aforementioned aspects in the future. Consequently, the discontinuation of third-party cookies does not necessarily signify the end of personalized advertising. Instead, it denotes a shift towards alternative solutions that place less emphasis on tracking and respect user integrity.

In answering the third question with regards to the reactions of online advertisers to the elimination of third-party cookies, including the implementation of substitute technologies and modifications in advertising tactic, based on the gathered feedback in terms of developing new strategies for a future without third-party cookies, two approaches appeared to be prevalent. The first approach is data-driven, where marketers explore emerging technologies, enhance existing methods, and gather performance metrics without relying on third-party cookies. The other approach is centered on qualitative, relevant, and imaginative communication that prioritizes content marketing in order to attract the appropriate audience. This study reveal that in the longer term new technologies such as machine learning, artificial intelligence, and blockchain may provide more advanced solutions for digital marketers to serve targeted ads and gather user data. However, these technologies are still in their early stages and it is unclear how they will be used in the context of digital marketing. Further more, the research can be used to analyse the impact of the elimination of third-party cookies on the cost of digital advertising within business or digital agencies. If it becomes more difficult to target ads, will advertisers be willing to pay as much for them. Or will they have to find new ways to measure the effectiveness of their ads in order to justify their spending.

5.1 Recommendations

The results of this study could be used to provide actionable recommendations to digital advertising professionals on digital advertising, ad targeting and the development of strategies and potential solutions. The suggested solutions (such as First-party data, Zero-first party, Contextual advertising, Email marketing, SEO, Content marketing) for generating individualized advertising and analytics without the use of third-party cookies could be viewed as directives or suggestions for adjusting to the new situation. The other solutions presented in this study could be more

relevant and significant for smaller businesses that lack the resources or financial capability to adopt new solutions or utilize first-party data. In addition, the information gathered on how the removal of third-party cookies impacts digital marketers, and how they respond to user privacy concerns, could be valuable for others in the industry who have yet to explore this topic. It is recommended that practitioners affected by this issue prepare and adapt proactively to avoid negative impacts on their business and outcomes. Additionally, the research findings can also provide internet users with insights into the use of third-party cookies, how regulations will alter the methods that marketers use to gather data, and what solutions might emerge in terms of personalized advertising while browsing online. In the post-cookie landscape, digital marketers are faced with the imperative to enhance transparency regarding their data collection practices. It becomes crucial for marketers to proactively communicate to customers the intricacies of data collection and its subsequent utilization. This transparency serves as a pivotal element in cultivating trust and fostering confidence among customers, thereby becoming an indispensable requirement for digital marketers to navigate this new paradigm effectively.

5.2 Limitations, delimitations and assumptions

It is important to note limitations in this study, which is the exclusive consideration of the digital marketer's viewpoint on the elimination of third-party cookies and the absence of insight into the stance of their customers who own the data and the impact that regulations have on them. The study specifically examines the impact of the elimination of third-party cookies on digital marketers. It does not delve into the effects on other stakeholders or industries outside the digital advertising realm. Due to resource constraints such as time, cost and personnel, the research was restricted to focus on online advertisers that use the Google platforms to place the online ads.

Therefore, the study does not encompass other online publishers such as Meta, Safari, or Firefox. The opinions expressed by the marketers are personal and do not necessarily represent the stance of the organizations or marketing agencies with which they are associated. The study assumes that that digital marketers heavily rely on third-party cookies for targeted advertising.

5.3 Future research

Since the digital marketing industry is continually evolving, conducting the same study at a different point in time could yield different research findings, given that new regulations and platforms are constantly changing, and innovative solutions are introduced. Given the increased focus on privacy in the post-cookie era, most responded raised the concerns that they will need to emphasize privacy and transparency in their data collection and analysis processes. This can involve obtaining consent from users for data collection and clearly communicating the types of data being collected and how it will be used. Therefore, suggestions on future research could consider the discourse on data privacy and to examine its implications for targeted advertising. Further academic and industry research can focus on the strategies employed by digital marketers to manage the organizational change resulting from the elimination of third-party cookies. This can include assessing the readiness of organizations to adapt, identifying barriers and facilitators of change, and exploring best practices in navigating the evolving advertising landscape. Another topic to further explore is the investigation of the implications of privacy regulations on digital advertising practices. Research can delve deeper into the impact of privacy regulations, beyond the removal of third-party cookies, on digital advertising operations. This can involve exploring the legal and ethical dimensions, understanding consumer perceptions and attitudes towards privacy, and examining the long-term effects of privacy regulations on the marketing strategies and practices of digital advertisers.

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APPENDIX A – PERMISSION LETTER

Graduate School of Business Administration
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
Wits Business School Ethics Committee
Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)

Ethics Clearance Certificate

Ethics protocol number:	WBS/BA2434798/360

This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).

Project title	Digital marketers' perspectives of the future of cookieless online advertising
Investigator / Researcher	Mrs Vivian Masadi Hlonyana
Nature of Project	MBA (Research Article)
Decision of the Committee	Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed confidentialty.
Issue Date of Certificate	25 09 2022
Expiry date	Date of submission of the project / research report
Chairperson	Prof Anthony Stacey
☎	+27 11 717 3587
📱	+27 82 880 4531
✉	anthony.stacey@wits.ac.za

Declaration by Researcher

One copy must be signed by the Researcher and returned to the Chairperson of the Wits Business School Ethics Committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Date: 25 September 2022 Signature: vhlonyana

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

I give consent to take part in the research on the evaluation of online advertising ecosystem after the phasing out of third-party cookies on Google platform: Will the online marketing ecosystem improve or worsen after the removal of third-party cookie. ***Title:*** *The future of cookie-less online advertising: a digital marketer perspective*

☐ I have read the Information Sheet, have asked questions about the study, and have satisfactory answers to my questions.

☐ I understand that this study has been reviewed by Wits Business School research department and received ethical clearance and approval.

☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw myself or any data during the first six (6) months of this study from October 2022, with a reasonable explanation.

☐ I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and that my personal information will not be shared.

☐ I understand that the research data, which will be anonymized (not linked to me, the educational brand and Higher Education provider), may be shared with others.

☐ I understand how the study will be written up and published.

☐ I agree that any data gathered from my participants may be retained, destroyed, or-reused

☐ I understand that I may seek further information on the study from Vivian Hlonyana via cellphone on +27 78 968 6884 or email: 2434798@students.wits.ac.za

I have initialled the above boxes myself and I agree to take part in the study. All information obtained will be treated in strictest confidence.

_____ _____

Participant Signature

_____

Date

Please return to 2434798@students.wits.ac.za

APPENDIX C: TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW EXAMPLE

Interview Participant 1

Date: 2022-12-28, 11.00am
Duration of time: 25min

Work Title	Years of Experience
Google Paid Media Specialist	10

Researcher: Hi, thank you for taking the time to participate in my study/

Respondent: Thank you for the invite, it's a hot topic right now, I wouldn't miss this opportunity.

Researcher: Interview question 1:Do you clearly understand the potential impact on your marketing strategies once third-party cookies are no longer supported by any major web browser – Google Chrome in particular.

Respondent: Yes, I do understand. Getting rid of third-party cookies is going to change how digital marketing works because these cookies are used a lot to track what people do online and show them ads. We won't be able to do it as easily as we could do it before, it will make it quite difficult. The impact will make it more difficult. Stats and goals harder to reach, kind target whoever you want to, we'll have to target specific people who have converted with us, it will make it slightly difficult in terms of all audience. However, it will not have an impact on search campaign as much but will impact display, discovery, YouTube . Now we have to target them based on first-party data. With the removal, we will have to find new ways to gather data, such as first-party data, browser-level data, and contextual data. This could result in more privacy-conscious and personalized marketing approaches. Also will also have to rely more on collaboration with platforms and publishers to target desired audiences. Which is something that was hardly done

before, I think overall, the removal of third-party cookies may bring challenges, but it will also offer opportunities for innovation in digital marketing.

Researcher: You mention “it will offer opportunities for innovation, do mind elaborating more on that?

Participants 1: Yes, opportunities because one of the key benefits is that it could force us as marketers to find new ways of targeting the audience that do not rely on tracking people's online activity. This could lead to a shift towards more privacy-friendly techniques, such as contextual advertising, which focuses on the content of the page rather than the user's browsing history. The removal of third-party cookies may also drive the adoption of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning. These technologies could be used to analyze large amounts of data to gain insights into user behavior and preferences, allowing for more accurate targeting of advertising.

Researcher: Interview question 2: With this shift, do you think the digital landscape is changing for the better or worse? Please explain your choice of selection.

Participant: I do believe it will change for the better. However, the transition may not be as smooth as we would like. Most local (South African) companies are not yet equipped to smoothly transition into this new era. We may not have the necessary resources, infrastructure and funds to afford innovative solutions. We have relied on cookies and data analysis and intelligence tis changing for the better or worse as it is a complex and multifaceted issue. On one hand, the growth of technology has brought many benefits such as increased connectivity, accessibility to information, and opportunities for innovation. On the other hand, it has also brought about privacy

concerns, misinformation, and digital divide issues. Overall, the impact of the shift in the digital landscape depends on how it is managed and used.

Researcher: Interview question 3: Customers want a personalized experience but also want their data to be respected – do you think this is something that can be done.

Yes, it is possible to provide a personalized digital experience while respecting customer's data. companies need to make sure they keep people's personal info safe by having good privacy policies and using technology to protect it. They should be honest about what data they collect and how they use it, and let customers have some say in how their data is used. To give customers a personalized experience, companies can use non-personal data or methods like pseudonymization and aggregation. The most important thing is to find a way to personalize experiences without violating people's privacy rights.

Researcher: Interview question 4: Would your key media and marketing partners need to have viable solutions in place that are privacy compliant? (in support of this shift)

Yes, as a digital marketer, it is important for my key media and marketing partners to have viable solutions in place that are privacy compliant. With the shift towards greater privacy protections, it is important that all players in the digital marketing ecosystem adhere to these new standards. This includes media partners, ad networks, data providers, and other key players in the space.

By having privacy-compliant solutions in place, my partners can ensure that they are meeting the expectations of their users and protecting their data. This can help to build trust with customers and strengthen relationships with partners. It can also provide a competitive advantage in a landscape where privacy concerns are increasingly top-of-mind for consumers. In addition, by having privacy-compliant solutions in place, my partners can avoid potential legal and reputational risks associated with non-compliance. The penalties for non-compliance with privacy regulations

can be severe, including fines and damage to brand reputation. By being proactive and implementing privacy-compliant solutions, my partners can mitigate these risks and ensure their long-term sustainability. As a digital marketer, I believe that it is important for my key media and marketing partners to have privacy-compliant solutions in place to support this shift towards greater privacy protections. This will not only help to build trust with customers but also avoid potential legal and reputational risks associated with non-compliance.