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# Awareness of cookie deprecation and implications for digital marketing strategies in South Africa

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**2024**
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Pillat, Celeste. (2024). Awareness of cookie deprecation and implications for digital marketing strategies in South Africa [Master's dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg].WireDSpace.https://hdl.handle.net/10539/44000

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# Awareness of cookie deprecation and implications for digital marketing strategies in South Africa

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**A research report 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 Management in the field of Digital Business**

**Johannesburg, 2024**

# Abstract

The phasing out of third-party cookie tracking in response to regulation to protect personal information, poses a challenge to Digital Marketers and personalised communication to customers. The paradox between privacy and personalisation is a new concept and as such the purpose of this study was to understand whether Digital Marketers are aware of cookie deprecation, the impact on Digital Marketing strategies and the approach to personalisation. An explorative qualitative design was chosen for the research, employing phenomenological methodology. The sample comprised of digital marketers, analysts, and media specialists for diverse perspectives. Data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, with thematic network analysis helping to find connections in data. The findings suggest that while Digital Marketers are aware of cookie deprecation, many are unaware of the possible impact on their strategies, or how to approach changes. Change was about a common theme with a pervasive undertone of anxiety. Digital maturity was an important factor for evaluating technological change, with gaps in future ready skills identified. The implications of cookie deprecation were extensive, surfacing a heavy reliance on first-party CRM data at the core for personalisation in strategies. Further implications include the ad-tech ecosystem needing to adopt innovative alternate methods of tracking which also impacts publishers, measurement and tracking. Regulation impacts companies and the need to ensure data collection is compliant.  The importance of privacy in digital marketing strategies remains crucial as change is constant.



**KEYWORDS**

Cookie deprecation, Protection of Personal Information Act, POPIA, Digital Marketing, Personalisation, Cookies, Digital Media

## Declaration

I, Celeste Pillay, declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in the field of Digital Business at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Name: Celeste Pillay Signature: 

Signed at: Johannesburg, Gauteng

On the ……3rd …….. day of ……June…… 2024

## Acknowledgement

To my incredible supervisor Dr Emmanuel Quaye who walked this journey with me, providing knowledge, assistance, and insightful observations along the way - thank you for dedicating your time and always being available.

To my husband Eden Pillay, for your unwavering support. Your belief in me brought out the resilience and determination to finish. Thank you for being patient throughout the process, always pushing me to win. Thank you to my mum, dad and family for holding me up in prayer and your constant words of encouragement. My little boy Callum, who will one day read this, you have been my motivation.

My colleagues at WBS, who became family, learning from each other, challenging each other, and growing together. Thank you for your vested interest.

Most importantly this would not have been possible without Jesus Christ who gave me the knowledge and wisdom, sustained me, and showed me that all things are possible to those who believe.

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# List Of Acronyms

**Table 1 List of Acronyms**

| **Acronym** | **Definition** |
|---|---|
| CDP | Customer Data Platforms |
| CLV | Customer Life-Time Value |
| CRM | Customer Relationship Management |
| DM | Digital Marketing |
| GDPR | General Data Protection Regulation |
| POPIA | Protection of Personal Information Act |

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Statement of purpose

The purpose of this research study was to understand the awareness of relevant stakeholders about cookie deprecation alongside privacy and personalisation in South Africa. The study utilised a qualitative research design to explore the awareness that digital marketers, analysts, and media specialists have on the issue, and how they approached navigating this new environment. Marketing strategies need to consider new methods in reaching customers in this paradox of privacy and personalisation so that marketing revenue streams continue to be effective.

## 1.2 Background: Digital marketing, data privacy regulations, and cookie deprecation

Digital marketing is a practice by which a brand promotes their products and services usually over the internet. According to Yasmin and colleagues (2015), various techniques encompass a digital marketer's strategy in promoting a brand - these include, but are not limited to: display advertising, and marketing through search engines, email, mobile, and video, among others. Digital marketers aim to understand audiences, precisely targeting with the correct messages, and utilising appropriate digital channels to reach a person in various stages of their online journey. Jain and Yadav (2017) explain that technology has a huge impact on communication and prospective customers.

Technology has evolved over the years, and now digital marketers can create online experiences through algorithms that can be supported by artificial intelligence (AI). Programmatic media buying is a clear example of the use of machine learning and artificial intelligence in marketing. Programmatic media buying uses algorithms and insights from data, and lately, AI, to bring advertisements (or adverts or ads) to a desirable user at the opportune time (Unni, 2022). In the digital sphere, the media buying process becomes automated where manual bids in online advert auctions are no longer necessary. The objective of AI and machine learning technology is to learn

from a user's behaviour and contextualise advert placements based on defined rules, such as recent activity, geo-location or demographics (G. Chen et al., 2019).

Advertising giants like Google and Facebook learn how people behave online using cookies. As defined by Abraham and colleagues (2007), cookies are small text files on a user's computer that identifies a domain and name-value pairs to organise information. Through a pre-defined connection, these browser cookies get fed into an advertising tool and then classified into different audience profiles that a digital marketer can target through marketing campaigns.

In the past, a user would unknowingly provide their data to a website owner, and the website owner would store this data as third-party information: until the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act No. 4, 2013) was introduced in South Africa. The POPI Act outlined how information ought to be stored, processed, and transmitted, and has a direct impact on personal information use and storage technology (Kandeh et al., 2018). As per the act, a user must provide consent for a website owner to store and use their personal information in the form of cookies (Debruyne et al., 2020).

In 2016, the European Union (EU) introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Public Service Union & Reuter, 2018), followed two years later by the state of California and their Consumer Privacy Act (de la Torre, 2018): these similarly describe the importance for users to provide consent in the collection of data. Website owners around the world have adapted to the regulations and South Africans have been tasked with the same responsibility when POPIA came into effect. The present challenge for digital marketers in South Africa includes not only the implementation of Customer Data Platforms (CDP) and website consent tools, but also a new approach in tracking users over the internet due to cookie deprecation.

In 2009, the EU introduced the 'cookie amendment' through their privacy regulation, which saw organisations apply cookie consent banners on websites (Kretschmer et al., 2021). Cookie consent banners initially created the awareness that the website would be tracking a user's information. Users have the option to decline cookie capturing from a website (Abraham et al., 2007), which caused a shift

in the advertising world as cookies feed into advertising tools. Browsers are also phasing out cookie tracking due to previously recorded data breaches and to be compliant with different personal information laws across the world. This phasing out of cookie tracking is commonly termed as ‘cookie deprecation.’ It has been implemented on Apple browsers and will soon be effective on Google (Apple Inc, 2019; Google, 2022).

In South Africa, cookie deprecation is an outcome of the POPIA regulation. It serves as a measure to protect data subjects’ personal information in a digital world, more specifically, in advertising. Identifying quality prospects, re-engaging customers who have shown interest but have left the journey, and targeting users based on their previously visited websites are all part of digital marketers’ efforts in personalisation (Kelleher et al., 2021). Without a user’s browser cookies, there is much to be desired to enable brands to reach the right audience and to convert some of them into tangible leads.

## 1.3 Research problem

Digital marketers heavily rely on cookies for audience targeting, retargeting and personalisation. The gap is that without a clear understanding of cookie deprecation, they may not realise the impending challenges in these areas, leading to ineffective targeting strategies and reduced campaign performance. According to Acquisti et al., (2015) an individual’s ability to navigate privacy related changes comes with complete and symmetrical information about the topic. If information is not provided, and people are unaware, understanding how to react is limited. El Hana et al., (2023) further notes that advertisers need to start pivoting now to prepare for what’s next. Theoretically, people are at the centre of change (not processes) and change occurs when awareness and knowledge is expounded. The impact of change is great, especially when a digital marketer is found at the epicentre of such change, with influences from regulation and technology on either side.

For the longest period of time, marketing strategies that are focused on a customer’s needs work best when it is directed to a specific user and a particular point in their online journey. Marketing to an ‘audience of one’ is defined as

personalisation - a marketer can use data analytics to craft advertising that is specific and targeted (Behera et al., 2020). According to Schubert and Ginsburg (2000), personalisation was inherited from relationship marketing, where one builds trust and community, driving towards a positive customer lifetime value (CLV). Thaichon and colleagues (2019) talk about long-term relationship building through constant communication with customers that is based on value-adding, mutually beneficial information. When quality relationships are built, this also increases the CLV. Building a consumer relationship through the internet takes on many forms, and one common way to connect to a customer was to use third-party data in the form of browser cookies.

In the wake of the Protection of Personal Information Act, as of 1 July 2020, obtaining consent from customers became key in formulating marketing strategies. Oksanen (2022) describes cookie deprecation as being a reality, further elaborating that while organisations are aware of privacy protection through the various regulations, not all are aware that online marketing strategies will need to change to both comply with regulation and the changes that technology giants, such as Google and Facebook, are implementing. Traditional approaches to digital marketing using cookies to target a user remain the focal point of strategies while the phasing out of cookie tracking is eminent. Wind & Mahajan, p. (2002, p. 43) referred to “nurturing ecosystems” as a metaphor to marketing, rather than “targeting customers,” and this holds true today, given the changes that organisations will need to adopt.

A digital marketer’s arsenal of tools for reaching a customer comprises of search engine optimisation, SMS marketing, direct marketing through surveys, social media marketing, event marketing and many others. In Guttman's (2021) report on developed economies, 11.2% of digital marketing budget is attributed to digital advertising, with social media advertising at 11.3%. These equate to the majority of a digital marketers’ spend, signalling the importance of this specific tool in reaching customers. Digital marketing in the South African market, as forecasted by Statista (2022), will see 88% of digital advertising revenue generated by programmatic advertising by 2027. With the high attention paid to digital advertising and its targeting precision, one cannot ignore any changes to the medium now and in years to come. Privacy regulations like the GDPR and POPIA are forcing large tech

companies to change their methods, which will further impact how digital marketers use these platforms to reach customers (Urban et al., 2020).

The incorporation of cookie deprecation becomes crucial to how digital marketers adapt their strategies accordingly. If digital marketers do not have knowledge and understanding of POPIA or cookie deprecation, they will continue to employ methods using personal information in advertising, and this exposes a brand to legal issues from using personal customer data without consent (Estrada-Jiménez et al., 2019). A foundational understanding of regulation is important to fully understand the change. Literature is limited as the change presents a new phenomenon; the assumption is that awareness of regulation is limited along with limited understanding of cookie deprecation.

A lack of awareness and knowledge about the topic poses South African digital marketers with a dual challenge because of the urgency to instil and comply with regulations, along with the changes that technology giants are rolling out. How will digital marketers approach their marketing strategies given the reliance on cookies in digital advertising and the implementation of POPIA?

## 1.4 Research questions

The main research questions are:

1. Are digital marketers in South Africa aware of the impact of cookie deprecation on their marketing strategies?

2. How will digital marketers approach personalisation, considering the effects of cookie deprecation?

## 1.5 Rationale

The study aims to unpack how digital marketers navigated the Protection of Personal Information Act from an advertising point of view, given the changes around personal information in collection of cookies and data management platforms. According to Manyame (2020), data protection must be considered from the consumer’s side, including clear information to the data subject about how their

information will be used, then presenting the option to consent or not. Consumers may refrain from accepting cookies without information about how they will be used. Further, some website owners do not have cookie consent tools in place that allow consumers to manage preferences, negatively impacting advertising from consumers refusing to accept cookies. If a consumer does not accept cookie tracking on a website, the first-party data that gets transferred to Google or Facebook decreases. Audience size and quality weakens, and advertising mechanisms enabled with artificial intelligence lose their intended effect in personalising advertising to consumers.

This cycle is a new phenomenon in the South African advertising industry. Digital marketers need to adapt to new regulations regarding the protection of personal information, and at the same time, owners of websites need to ensure cookie consent tools are in place and to keep pace with technology companies changing browser tracking.

Taking a closer look at technology giants and the various browsers that have disabled cookie tracking, Google, who dominate the global browser industry by 65% market share Oksanen (2022), announced that starting in 2022, Chrome would stop collecting marketing cookies, and this move was later postponed to 2024 (Statista, 2021). This follows other browsers such as Mozilla's Firefox, Apple's Safari and Microsoft's Edge. Google, however, halted their implementation due to investigating an alternate solution of tracking, which was still in production on a real time developer sandbox in 2021 (Goel, 2021). Google's two-stage approach describes phase one for testing and migration happening in 2022, and phase two as roll out and support, ending in 2024.

According to PrivacySandbox (2023), the latest privacy techniques are on the table. These include differential privacy, a system for sharing information about the dataset to reveal patterns of behaviour without revealing private information about the individual; K-anonymity, which is a measure of anonymity within a dataset, that is, if you have k=1000 anonymity, a user can't be distinguished from 999 other individuals in the data set. Another technique, On-device processing, is computation performed 'locally' on a device, such as a phone or a computer, without communicating with external servers. Privacy Sandbox explores other forms of

tracking such as fingerprinting, which is collecting information about a person's software and hardware for the purpose of identification. Google rolled out their testing phase for Tracking Protection to one percent of users in January 2024 with the aim to phase out 100% of third-party cookies in the second half of the year.

According to Tinkler (2021), third-party cookie deprecation also impacts the ability to measure media outcomes, including conversion tracking, attribution to the right sales channels, audiences, and re-marketing. This arises from the diminished visibility of match rates between offline actions and online behaviour.

These changes to how digital information can be used in marketing beg the question: are digital marketers and companies aware of the new advances, and do they have plans on how to approach marketing strategies given these changes?

This research intended to understand awareness levels alongside how digital marketers are, to this day, approaching changes to regulation and cookie deprecation. The study shines a light on growth and gaps in the industry and among digital marketers from different organisations. Adaptation to change forms a crucial cornerstone of this research and the intended consequences are to, at a micro level, improve business through safe, privacy-conscious digital marketing practices. These include personalisation in a privacy era and improvement of customer lifetime value, among others.

## 1.6 Delimitations of the study

The study provides an overview of the changing advertising landscape in terms of personal protection as well as the changing rules from big technology companies. The study included elements of current digital marketing strategies involving personalisation and the shifts required to abide to new regulation. The study did not directly address personal consent rights from a consumer's perspective and rather focused on how marketers need to consider personal information in their marketing strategies.

The POPI Act describes many forms of data protection and consent mechanisms, especially in direct marketing practice, which falls under digital marketing. However, this study focused on protection of information in the context of

digital advertising and media. There were no concerns specific to a sector, industry, or organisation in South Africa, but rather an overview of marketing in general and how vested parties approach these new phenomena. This study excluded the eco-system of web-based analytics, such as Google Analytics and social media tracking. Digital media drives to websites and owned platforms, which is tracked using such analytics tools, in what is called 'session tracking.'

## 1.7 Definition of terms

The table below defines key terms used in this report.

**Table 2 Definitions of terms**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Ad auctions** | Online bidders competing for the best price on their advertising, given the number of slots available on Google or Facebook. It has been occurring automatically in recent years through algorithms and artificial intelligence (Decarolis & Rovigatti, 2017). |
| **Cookie** | Information in the form of text files that a website puts on a user's computer, also known as browser cookies. Cookies can be accessed by the browser user, the site a user is on, or by third parties for marketing purposes (Kerner, 2022). |
| **Cookie consent tools** | A tool embedded on a website that allows a user to manage cookie preferences and accept or decline cookies. It also allows the website owner to manage user data preferences. |
| **Cookie deprecation** | The phasing away of third-party cookies due to the protection of personal information regulation, largely due to privacy and data misuse concerns (Oksanen, 2022). |
| **Customer data platforms (CDP)** | A platform that unifies customer data from various sources. It provides a singular view of the customer and allows marketers the opportunity to assess customer behaviour over time (Gartner, 2022). |
| **Customer lifetime value (CLV)** | Measuring the potential value of each customer (Najib & Mulyati, 2019). Calculated as customer revenue per year multiplied by duration of the relationship in years equalling total cost of acquiring and serving the customer. |
| **Digital marketing** | The practice of creating targeted and measured adverts through the internet and other technological devices (Langan et al., 2019). |
| **First-party data** | Defined as client data or data that a website owner collects on an audience (Cahn et al., 2016). |
| **Personalisation** | Targeting advertising messages to an audience of one by |

| | |
|---|---|
| | using data analysis and customisation (Behera et al., 2020). |
| **POPIA** | The regulation of protecting personal information in South African, introduced in 2013. Personal information includes name, race, language, sex, pregnancy, marital status, national ethnic or social origin, among others (Da Veiga et al., 2019). |
| **Programmatic media buying** | Real-time bidding for audience impressions and personalised targeting (McGuigan, 2019). |
| **Second party data** | A user's data that an advertiser obtains and uses for marketing, often through a partnership and agreement (Cahn et al., 2016). |
| **Third-party data** | Data collected and owned by publishers in large volumes. This data informs audience targeting (Cahn et al., 2016). |
| **Unique identifier** | Any identifier that is assigned to a data subject and is used by a responsible party (González et al., 2017). |

## 1.8 Assumptions

Participants were not expected to reflect advanced knowledge of digital marketing personalisation as this is a niche area within marketing. It is with this reason that a broad scope of individuals such as data analytics specialists and media specialists were interviewed. Since cookie deprecation and the POPI Act are fairly new in South Africa, it was anticipated that some digital marketers would not be aware of mechanisms to approach it.

Considering that POPIA compliance deadlines were in 2021, most companies could still be addressing issues with cookie consent tools. Larger companies may be providing users with the option of accepting or declining cookies on their websites, however, managing the data within the tool is assumed to be lacking in many organisations. Smaller companies may need the resources and budget to implement new tools on their websites within the time to ensure compliance. Large technology companies are still in the roll-out phase of deprecating cookies on browsers such as Google. Advertising tools may only implement new rules once this comes into effect. This therefore creates an uncertain environment for digital marketers and in preparation for the date of release, new strategies need to be formulated.

## 1.9 Chapter Outline

Chapter one outlined the problem statement and identified the focus areas of the study: first if digital marketers were aware of cookie deprecation and the impact on their strategies, and second, how digital marketers unpacked the change in reference to personalisation and privacy.

Chapter two describes the literature supporting the research problem. This is underpinned by a theoretical framework adapted from the ADKAR model for change (Kliewe et al. 2013). Additionally, a conceptual model was created which shows how digital marketers are at the centre of the change, with the continued expectation to drive business outcomes. The topics of discussion include POPIA, cookie deprecation, awareness of its impact, and personalisation.

Chapter three concerns the research methodology. This was a qualitative study, employing the methods of interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore how individuals make sense of a specific experience or phenomenon. Twelve individuals were interviewed from diverse backgrounds within digital marketing: Digital marketers, digital data and analytics specialists, and digital media specialists.

Chapter four presents findings of the study. Data was analysed using thematic network analysis to arrive at specific themes.

Chapter five discusses the findings of the study against literature. The outcome was that digital marketers were aware of third-party cookie deprecation; however, their understanding was moderate to low, along with how they will be approaching their strategies.

Chapter six presents conclusions and recommendations for the future, suggesting that privacy must be considered, and that change management should be a focal point of an organisation.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the ADKAR theoretical framework and the conceptual framework drawn up for the study. The awareness of cookie deprecation is reviewed, followed by a review of digital marketing strategies that consider the protection of personal information, advertising and personalisation. The chapter ends with a summative discussion.

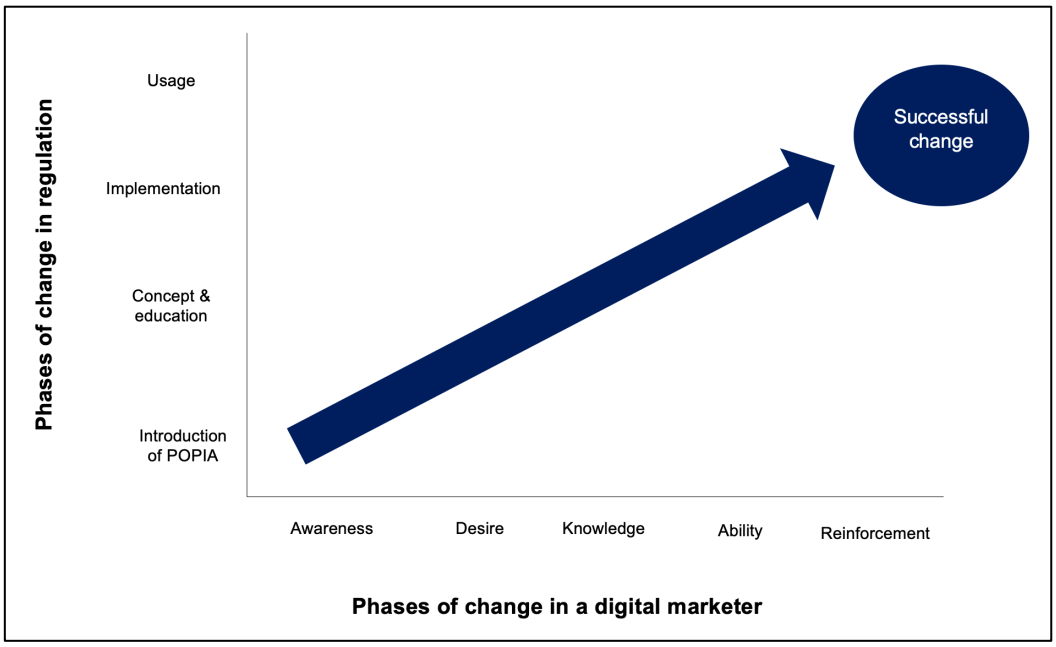
## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

### *2.2.1 ADKAR model*

Kliewe and colleagues (2013) explain that people, rather than processes, are at the centre of any change management model. The ADKAR model by Hiatt (2006) helps to explain awareness and approach to change. ADKAR stands for awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement (Hiatt, 2006). An adapted form of the model, following the example of Kliewe and colleagues (2013), demonstrates the relationship between the phases of change brought about by data and privacy concerns, against the phases of change necessary for sustainable and successful outcomes. Figure one presents the basic elements of the change process against the chronology of changes in digital data legislation.

The steps in the change model need to occur sequentially and are, in fact, cumulative (Hiatt, 2006). The first phase is awareness of the need to change. Awareness represents a person's understanding of the nature of change, why the change is being made, and in some cases, the risks associated with not changing. Education is a critical component of awareness. What's the value that the change can bring to a digital marketer. In this research, this refers to values surrounding data protection and compliance to the POPIA.

**Figure 1 Adapted ADKAR Model**




*Note*: This figure is adapted from Jeff Hiatt (2006) and Kliewe et al. (2013), pg.2

The factors that influence success in *awareness* are: (1) a person's perception of the current state; (2) how a person generally approaches problems; (3) how credible the source of the awareness message is; (4) misinformation and rumours; and lastly, (5) how these changes could be reasonably contested (Kliewe et al., 2013).

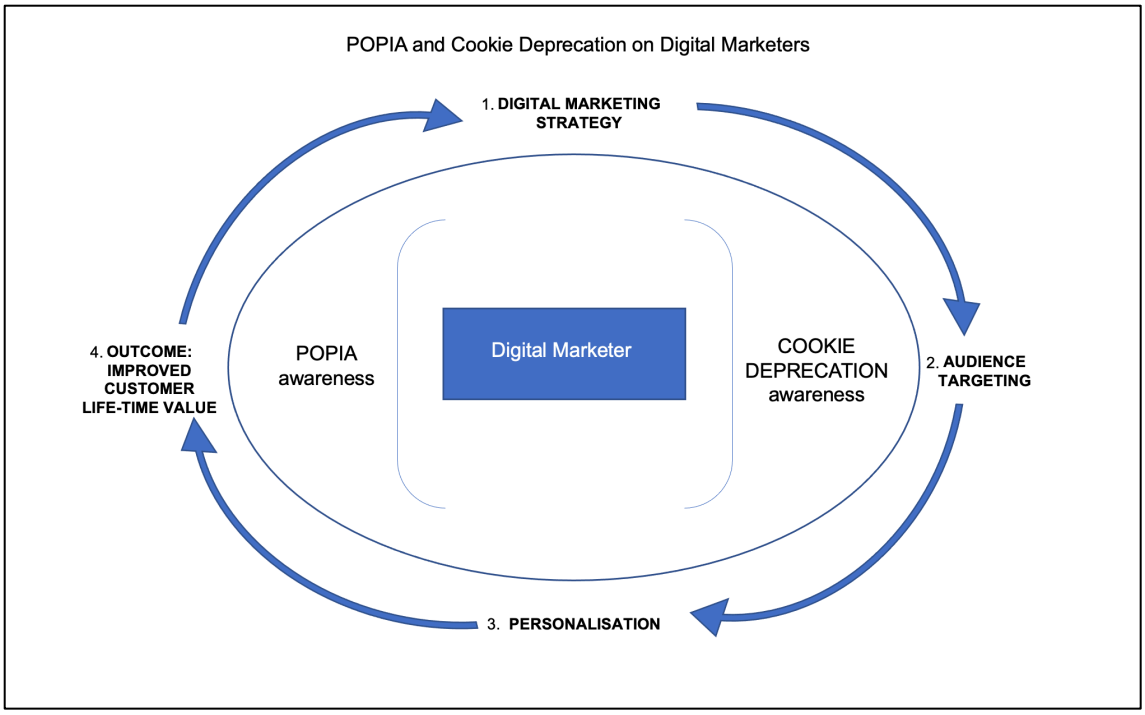
There is a definite lack of literature on South African digital marketing in this realm, and the impact/effect of changes are not clearly explored to address how digital marketers need to adapt to the changes in the industry. Literature speaks to privacy, and the demise of cookies, but little has been found that addresses how digital marketers need to approach the change, what needs to be considered for marketing strategies and how to cope with the changes, whilst still remaining relevant and current.

### *2.2.2 Conceptual Framework/Key concepts*

The digital marketer's role within the environment of new regulation and cookie deprecation is complex. Shown in the conceptual model (figure two), a digital marketer exists within the realm of two influences. On one hand, they are expected to comply with POPIA, and on the other, they are expected to have some awareness

of cookie deprecation related to its effect on their industry. Digital marketers face these two phenomena simultaneously, that is, while non-compliance with POPIA is not an option, cookie deprecation is a standard across digital platforms. Digital marketers need to be aware of the impeding change. Navigating these two changes within digital marketing strategies is crucial.

**Figure 2 Conceptual model of digital privacy changes**




Surrounding the change in legislation and everyday practice, the outer circle of the model, a digital marketer's role will be to formulate digital marketing strategies (1) that consider POPIA and cookie deprecation. Within a new digital marketing strategy, a digital marketer needs to consider new methods of audience targeting (2), as utilising personal information without consent is against regulation. Once marketers develop audience strategies that integrate POPIA and cookie deprecation, personalisation (3) approaches need to be revised. The outcome of a successful digital marketing strategy could lead to (4) improved customer loyalty in the form of extended customer life-time value. The model places awareness at the core, and changes in marketing approaches surrounding this core element. The change in marketing illustrates the process a digital marketer needs to make.

## 2.3 Definition of topic and background discussion

### *2.3.1 Protection of Personal Information Act*

The POPI Act was passed to regulate and control the collection of data, and its transfer and storage, eliminating ambiguity around digital advertising that is sometimes ambiguous (POPI Act No. 4, 2013). Sections related to digital marketing are discussed here. Section 23 of POPIA describes the right for a data subject to access their information and request their information on record. Section 57 speaks to obtaining prior authorisation from the Regulator if a responsible party plans on processing any unique identifiers or data subjects. Anyone collecting and using data is prohibited from processing special personal information in the form of Big Data as stated in Section 26. Big data is used predominantly by major technology players to understand audiences, as they process classified and unclassified data (Favaretto et al., 2020). Section 11 is dedicated to address direct marketing, which is a function of digital marketing and an enabler of electronic communication. This speaks to specific consent, justification, and objection, along with having the ability to opt out.

Unique identifiers are a critical aspect addressed by the act, specifically relating to the way browsers create and use cookies. POPIA cautions the processing of these unique identifiers for purposes other than intended. This includes linking information to third parties, transferring this information to another country, and others. Tech companies have relied on this information and need to find a work around for this unique data.

Everyone has the right to privacy, and that includes the “right to protection against the unlawful collection, retention, dissemination and use of personal information”(POPI Act No. 4, 2013, p. 2). At the forefront are the rights of data subjects and the compliance of responsible parties.[1]

Tech giants have owned the rights to data as systems continue to collect online behaviour. The full disclosure of the use of data once it has been collected is not a common practice and, in most respects, the data subject has no knowledge or effect on the use of their own data. Wiertz and Kittinger-Rosanelli (2021) call this the

[1] in this case, these would include industry leaders and technology giants such as Google and Facebook

unintended consequence of digital marketing. Marketers have relied on data and algorithms to learn behaviours and make decisions. Before regulations, companies did not need the consent of customers to collect and keep this data. With the commodification of data, making it an asset to most companies, transparency and volition were absent.

### *2.3.2 Cookie deprecation*

In response to regulations around the world to protect a user's information, and to comply with rules surrounding unique identifiers, internet browsers have started phasing out cookie tracking. This is called '**cookie deprecation.'** Digital marketing is dependent on third-party data in the form of cookies. Programmes process the cookies to locate data points for marketers that give them specific information about a user. Re-targeting is a mechanism used by advertisers that shows an ad to a user who has showed interest in a product/service before. As defined by Prasad and colleagues (2021), re-targeting is a powerful way to drive conversion and performance in a marketing campaign. Re-targeting predominantly uses third-party cookies as a function to serve targeted adverts to a user.

The travel and tourism industry, for example, make full use of re-targeting (Liu et al., 2013). If an advertiser promotes a travel package via a banner on a tourism publication, and a user clicks on this promotional banner, they land on their website. The website (through the browser) identifies the user's interest in the travel package and collects their data (through a third-party cookie). The cookie feeds back into the ad server (like Google) and targets the user again with the same offer, often making it more attractive, since the user has already expressed interest. The probability of the user purchasing the package is higher at this stage and will most likely convert from an interest to a purchase (possibly on the day or a few days later after some consideration).

Another example of the use of cookies in advertising is through 'contextual advertising'. These advertisements are tailored to the content of the website (Schmucker, 2011). The ad server identifies and extracts keywords from a website and then matches them to an audience profile. If the audience profile is interested in lifestyle and baking, then relevant ads are more likely to be placed on a lifestyle and

baking website. These audience profiles are built using cookies and online behaviour. Online behavioural targeting is also another mechanism in advertising that is guided by a user's browser history and search behaviour (Carrascosa et al., 2015).

Cookies are used in digital advertising to target audiences and for online marketing in general. The literature on cookie deprecation, however, is limited as it is so recent, so its effects are unfolding and as yet unclear. Oksanen (2022) developed a model to assess the maturity of cookie deprecation in organisations. The model helps raise awareness and foregrounds critical capabilities to be considered: it evaluates a company's readiness and maturity for the deprecation of third-party cookies. The model uses three dimensions: (1) First-party data, (2) Targeting, and (3) Develop marketing maturity. These are further unpacked into sub-dimensions which include consent collection. Levels of maturity were then matched against each sub-dimension, from very low to very high. These levels were aggregated and compared. Figure three illustrates the model and usage of the various dimensions.

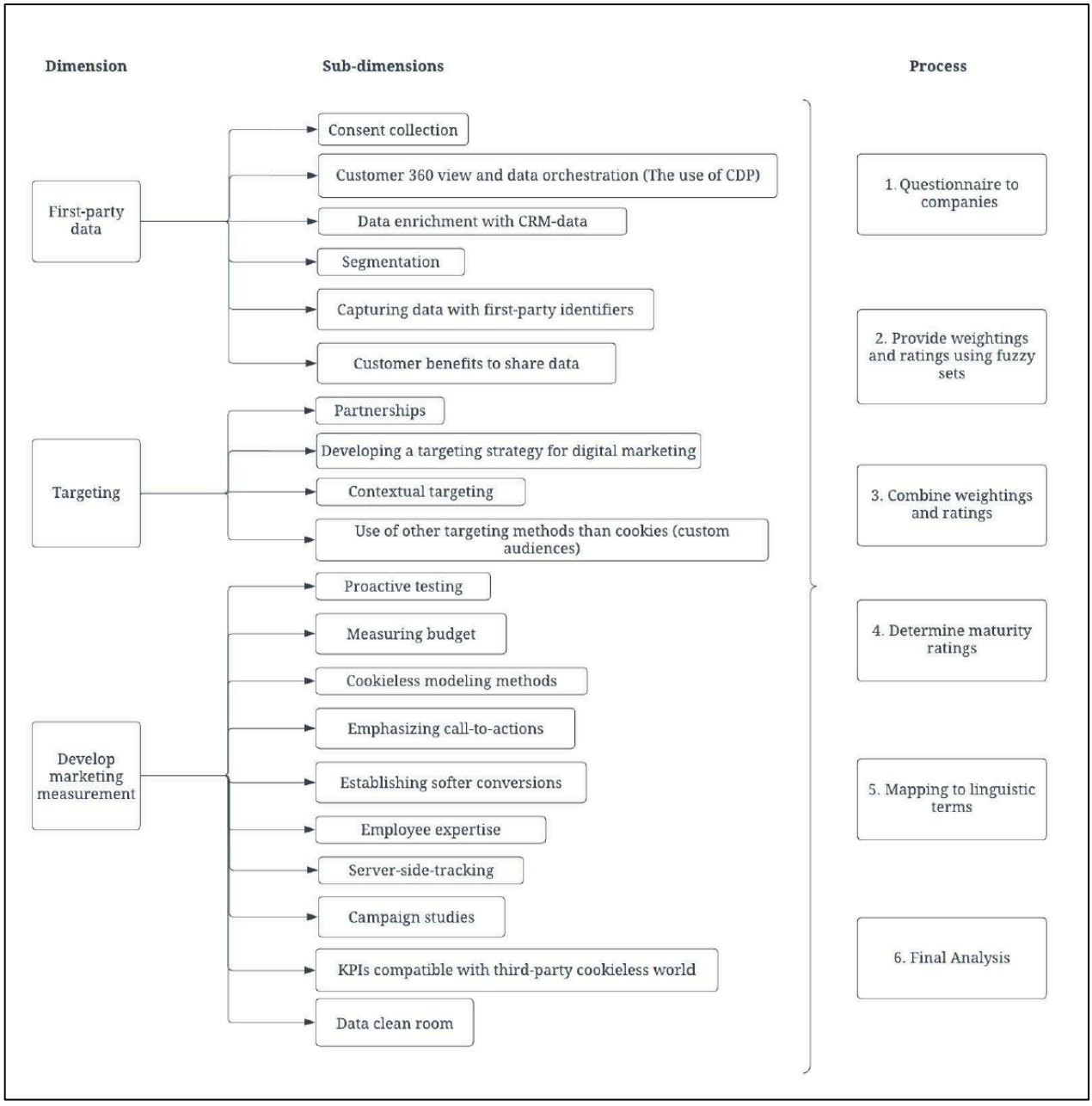
The findings from Oksanen's (2022) research indicates that companies in general were fair as they landed on the integrated or modified maturity level. The dimension where companies scored the highest was in first-party data, but the lowest was in developing marketing measurement, tying the discussion back to digital marketing strategies and the effectiveness of such.

## 2.4 Cookie Deprecation and digital marketing strategies

Research Question 1: Are digital marketers in South Africa aware of the impact of cookie deprecation on their marketing strategies?

The research questions for this study concerned new regulations and the changing landscape around using cookies. Collecting and using cookies, long being the conventional method of doing digital marketing, is no longer an option as per new laws and regulations around personal information and cookie deprecation. This question concerns digital marketers' awareness of the changing landscape in terms of cookie deprecation and what internet browsers are developing and implementing as alternate solutions for tracking.

**Figure 3 Third-party cookie maturity model** (Oksanen, 2022, p.39)



### *2.4.1 Awareness of the impact of cookie deprecation*

According to Siraj (2021), personalisation and privacy concerns are interlinked. This means that customers enjoy personalised marketing services and are concerned about how much information a company has about them. (Lee & Cranage, 2011) . With the continuing growth of digital markets and marketing, POPIA presents an inalienable regulation requiring compliance and has become de rigueur in legal departments of organisations in the digital sphere - are digital marketers seeing it only as a regulation enforced by the company? Buchholz (2022) suggests that cookie deprecation is a blow to marketers who will need to consider different methods in obtaining behavioural information from browser operators instead of tracking the bulk of browser cookies. Digital marketers need to understand the connection between privacy and personalisation and not only consider it in terms of compliance and regulation.

A report outlined by Adweek (2022) suggests that marketers are still not ready for a world without cookies. The report describes how marketers have doubts about privacy, negative attitudes towards browsers, and their own fears about not being able to personalise content to users. This report reflects an international view, but in the South African context, digital marketing literature and research concerning digital marketers is limited.

When the European GDPR came into effect, Forrester (2017) predicted that companies would be fined up to four percent of global annual revenue for GDPR violations. There was a sense of uncertainty about the future of marketing, a fear of the unknown and little understanding on how to approach this issue. Marketers were somewhat aware of the regulation and its repercussions but did not understand the scope of its impact.

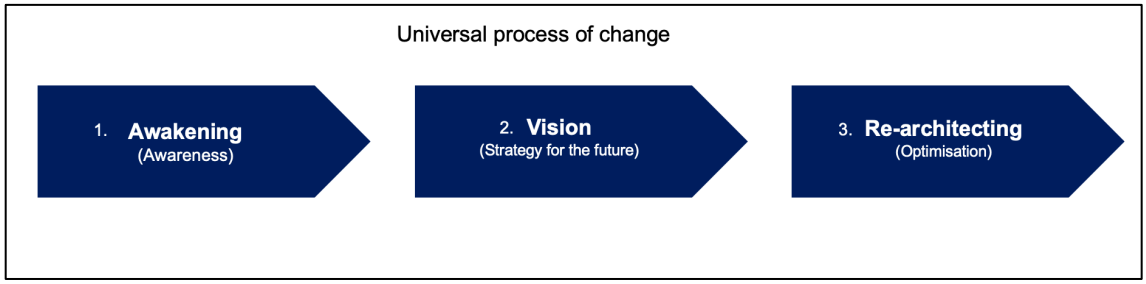
Programmatic media buying changed media buying from manual, expensive, and time-consuming methods to an automatic, real-time bidding model (Lee & Cho, 2020). Starr (2015) identified it as being efficient and effective and it accounted for 73% of ad spend in the United States at the time. This enabled the optimisation of advertising inventory on-the-go. With this change came uncertainty and doubt from digital marketers, primarily from people being unaware of the impact that

programmatic media buying had on their day-to-day work. Starr (2015) explains that there were concerns around publisher relationships and even restrictions to creative freedom. The shifts that programmatic media buying brought to digital marketing in the mid 2010's were immense. While the connotation was more positive than negative, not based on regulation and compliance, there was still a level of anxiety among digital marketers about new technology and change in digital media and marketing practices. There is limited literature and theory to support the problem .

## Proposition Development

Royle and Laing's (2014) study investigated digital marketers' skills gaps and interestingly, they identified the lack of future proofing for technological change as both a challenge and a gap in skills. This is still relevant today, where people are resistant to change with any new technology or regulation. People need to be educated and supported with the adoption of anything new. Tichy and Sherman (2001) break down the process of change in a three-phase model, illustrated in figure four.

**Figure 4: Universal process of change**




*Note: Adapted from* Tichy & Sherman (2001)

Awakening is the first phase where an organisation realises a need for change, likened to awareness on an individual level. It is not uncommon for this initial phase to manifest into fear, but this can change into a plan of action to address the fear. The second phase is vision, where a map for the future is created. Here, people who have resisted change begin to recognise and understand the need for it and for something new. Lastly the third phase calls for re-architecting and re-building at a continuous improvement level. This is implementation of the plan for the future, to integrate with changes. These three phases are applicable to the processes that

digital marketers have when experiencing change in the industry. Although the model suggests change at an organisational level, the process closely relates to how individuals approach change and their hypothetical behaviours thereof.

Whether digital marketers are aware of the impact of cookie deprecation or not, there must be an awakening to meet the need for change introduced by the POPI Act in 2020. This awareness could be an amalgamation of fear and resistance to the impact of said change. This could follow a process similar to when programmatic media was first introduced. First people became aware, then there was resistance. The media strategies began changing and digital marketers are now at a stage of optimisation where they have increased campaign performance through programmatic media buying.

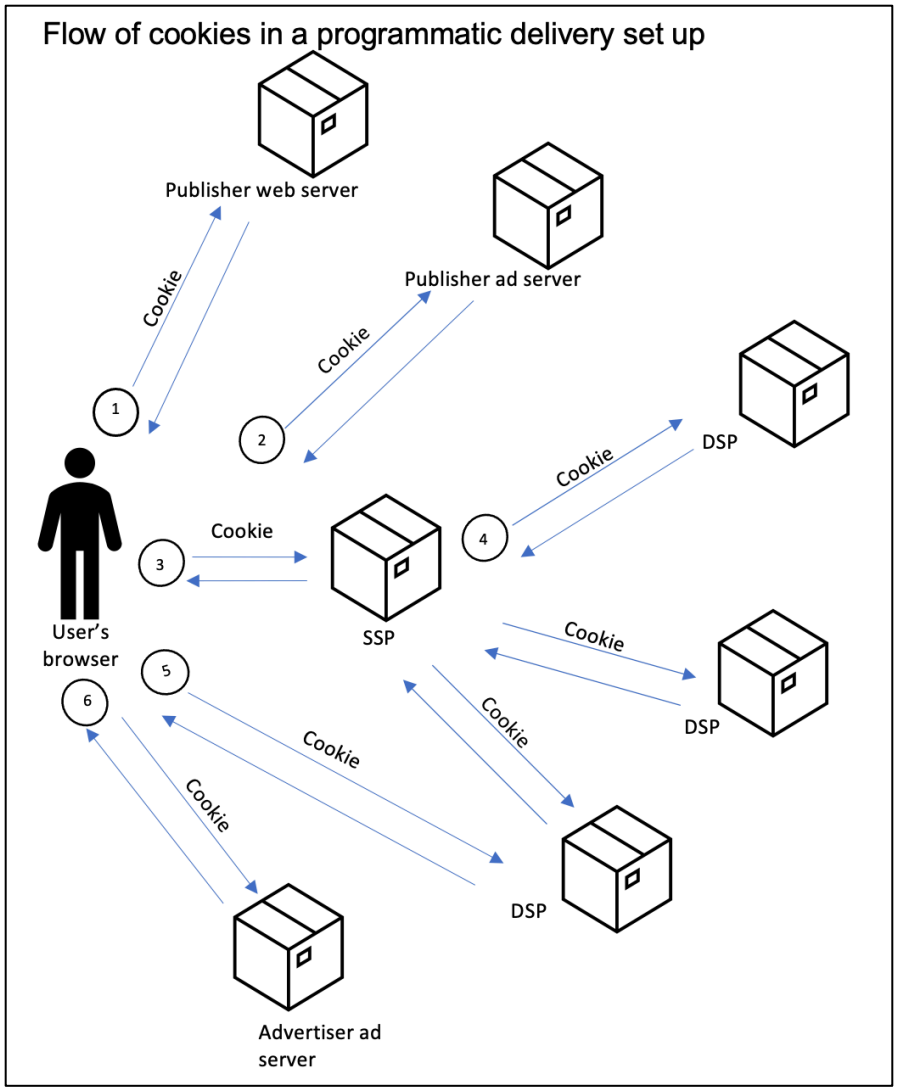
### *2.4.2 How cookies work*

The flow of cookies was mapped out in complicated eco-systems that tech-giants have developed over decades (Sanchez-Rola et al., 2021). Because of the nature of real-time bidding, programmatic advertising sends large amounts of signals and calls to servers, while in the process of using cookies to identify users. Thomas (2021) gives a simplified view of the system, describing the first step as being a user's browser requesting a page from a publisher's website. The HTML is served with a first-party cookie. The publisher directs the browser and contacts the demand side platform (DSP). The DSP reads the cookie and then performs a live auction for the ad spot. This process involves reaching the sell side platform (SSP) where multiple platforms (websites) are connected. The cookie is passed to the SSP. The browser contacts the winning DSP, and the auction sale is processed. Once all the back-end tracking is complete, the advertisement is displayed to the user. The ad servers also set a third-party cookie for measurement. This process is fully automated and illustrated in figure five.

With cookie deprecation, the detailed flow of cookies is longer applicable. Since Apple has already removed browser tracking (Apple Inc, 2019), they have implemented what they call Intelligent Tracking Prevention into their back end. This limits the call and send ability to and from browsers and servers, also known as cross-site tracking, thus enabling permissions on a device. Apple (2019) recognises

that websites still need to function normally, so through machine learning they learn about domains and aim not to share browser history information with the company. Apple believes advertising should be non-invasive, and so they offer ‘Private Click Measurement’. This is built on privacy principles, for example, no cross-site tracking but rather tracking a user’s visits and conversions on a site.

**Figure 5 Depicting the flow of cookies to and from servers**




*Note: Adapted from* Thomas (2021, p.7)

Google, on the other hand is still in the discovery phase. Their Privacy Sandbox initiative is still exploring different, regulation compliant areas of browser tracking. Google (2022) explains that the technology they are developing addresses

privacy concerns, while still enabling advertising. Their aim is to reduce cross-site tracking while keeping content free. Google are looking at new web standards with safer alternatives.

> ***Proposition 1:*** *A digital marketer's awareness levels of cookie deprecation and the changing landscape has implications on how digital marketing strategy is practiced. If awareness levels are low, reaching the right target audiences, or utilising effective personalisation techniques, could impact the value a digital marketer brings to the organisation and potentially the bottom line.*

## 2.5 Cookie deprecation and personalisation

With the phasing-out of third-party cookies, marketing in the digital sphere will have to find new ways to approach personalisation. Cookie deprecation changed how a digital marketer collects information about a user. Without sufficient information about a target audience, personalisation efforts are limited. This section explains what personalisation means, its evolution over years, and what the future could hold. It is also important to unpack a digital marketing strategy, how it includes personalisation, some information about the media mix included in a strategy and shifts towards new ways of working taking cookie deprecation into consideration.

### *2.5.1 Personalisation*

With the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), businesses use technology to reach customers in more targeted ways. Digital transactions are tailored for a user's specific search on the internet. Through advertising, websites communicate purchases that have not been fulfilled. They are notified if you have abandoned a cart, and they could even offer you products of similar nature, also known as cross selling (Dutta & Bhattacharya, 2019). The great part about this approach is that not all customers are treated the same and this gives the customer a sense of individual interest.

Hemker and colleagues (2021) talk about personalisation creating an overall congenial online experience for a customer, and them completing their transactions with a positive sentiment. Value creation depends on the right fit between what a

customer wants and needs versus what a company can provide (Tam & Ho, 2005). With a user's data, a company is closer to understanding their customers' needs and wants, allowing them to provide suitable offers. The end goal is customer satisfaction and positive feelings towards the brand. Companies use message differentiation through segmentation as a starting point in personalisation (Postma & Brokke, 2002). This refers to the content associated with a specific audience interest that gets displayed, going beyond just a personalised greeting on a website when logged into an online store.

Personalisation dates back to face-to-face relationship building, where a person within a company built a relationship with a customer (Shen & Ball, 2009). They knew specific detail about how many sugars they took in their coffee, how they prefer to structure their contract, or the type of information that is needed to conclude a sale. This interaction is commonly known as retention building and enhancing services, so a customer stays loyal to a company for many years (Kaur, 2023). This still exists, but marketing departments have evolved to delivering personalisation through technology (not replacing relationship-building but enhancing it in a marketing form).

The level of information acquired by representatives within a company, and their knowledge base about customers, amounts to terabytes of collective data. With the scope and depth of this data, it is not unrealistic to wonder whether this information is protected, or if companies rely on non-disclosure agreements and code of conduct clauses to protect their customer. One can further question whether the same rules apply when it comes to marketing personalisation through technology. The concern is the internet and the open source of information that is collected through the global network that is not entirely private.

With technological advancements, marketing possibilities increase and the amount of knowledge that a company acquires increases, too. When a user does not associate marketing personalisation with an actual person, it causes trust concerns and fears of peril regarding willingly shared data (Hemker et al., 2021). Westin (1967) elaborates that privacy is "the desire of people to choose freely under what circumstances and to what extent they will expose themselves, their attitude and

behaviour to others." Personalisation needs to consider principles of privacy, and the protection of personal information in marketing is catapulting this discussion.

### *2.5.2 Current digital marketing strategies addressing privacy*

Historically, marketers were tasked with developing marketing strategies based on the four P's of the 'marketing mix' (McCarthy, 1960). The 4Ps provide a framework for marketers to make decisions around product, price, place and promotion. In many ways, these principles still exist in the marketing context of the 21st century, although extended to 7Ps with the inclusion of the service industry (personnel, physical assets, and procedures) (Harrington et al., 2017). Goldsmith (1999) introduced the eighth 'P,' personalisation, as part of the mix. Mass marketing has branched out into micro-marketing, and customisation is the name of the game (Nunes & Merrihue, 2007). Within marketing strategies, personalisation exists as an overarching aspect encompassing the other P's. In other words, personalisation can be considered in the place where you market, the price for specific segments, how products are promoted, the characteristics of personnel, physical assets such as rewards or customised store décor, and procedures. However, the expanded 'marketing mix' does not naturally include privacy as a guard rail when it comes to decision-making and strategy development.

From a contemporary view, a digital marketer's strategy consists of elements such as social media marketing, search engine marketing (Pay per Click and Search Engine Optimisation), website marketing, programmatic media (display adverts), video marketing and mobile marketing to name a few (D. Ryan, 2014). Personalisation is possible for each of the elements listed, for example, hyper personalisation in social media as marketers interact directly with customers, or audience segmentation when using video marketing on platforms like YouTube. Privacy has become a major concern when developing digital marketing strategies.

There is limited literature on how digital marketers are considering privacy and the protection of personal information in their strategies currently. Descriptions and reports exist on how tech giants are phasing out cookies, however a more robust view of the actual strategies from digital marketers are few and far between. An example is that digital marketers will no longer be able to effectively perform re-

marketing because of private data protection regulations, but there is no clear and straightforward approach to what can be done to replace this effective type of marketing.

Bleier and colleagues (2020) contend that there are areas that can mitigate concerns in data-based innovation and marketing when it comes to privacy. Privacy innovations present possible opportunities, and even competitive advantage. The concept is brought forward by the Porter hypothesis “to which properly designed environmental standards can trigger innovation that may partially or more than fully offset the cost of complying with them” (Porter & Van der Linde, 1995, p. 85).

Companies are developing innovative products, such as blockchain technologies, as privacy protection innovations that could manage personal data and identities. Bleier and colleagues (2020) describe a new kind of innovation, such as the Publiq network, that could supply alternative financing for monetisation that can protect private user data. Applications on a users’ devices that monitors data and privacy of that data are some of the privacy-conserving solutions that can be developed by enterprising entrepreneurs. As far as privacy being an opportunity for competitive advantage, firms are starting to use privacy to their advantage in creating new online experiences. Transparency in how customers’ data is protected is key, and disclosure can profit a company in more ways than one, building loyalty and trust. Customers may be more willing to provide their information to a company if they knew what and how their data will be used (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999).

> ***Proposition 2:*** *Unpack how digital marketers are approaching their strategies in anticipation of the Google cookie phase out and if therein lie any opportunities with personalisation techniques and positive digital marketing deliverables to the organisation.*

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided a description of marketing practices, how user data in the form of third-party cookies were used, and the impact that the introduction of cookie deprecation had in a marketing context.

Firstly, the sections within the POPI Act that one will need to consider when engaging in any form of marketing, be it advertising or from a data subject point of view is explored. A detailed explanation about cookie deprecation is unpacked, including a maturity model developed by Oksanen (2022) which identifies how firms are tackling cookie deprecation. This led to the first research question which states “Are digital marketers in South Africa aware of the impact of cookie deprecation in their marketing strategies?” Limited literature exists in this context, as this is a relatively recent change. A key point is awareness and it’s importance in any element of change. The universal process of change adapted from Tichy and Sherman (2001)shows that there needs to be an awakening before a vision and optimisation can take place.

The review briefly covered alternate methods of user tracking, highlighting various technical approaches that big tech companies are rolling out in the industry. Google, the widest-used browser, is still developing alternatives to data tracking and are expected to affect cookie deprecation by the end of 2024. The descriptions of how cookies are used showed how fundamentally marketers depended on cookies, prompting the need for new marketing strategies with changes in law and regulations.

The second research question continued the discussion on existing digital marketing strategies involving personalisation. It was argued that the open nature of the internet, at times unregulated and free, increased the risks when it came to the protection of personal information. Although there is much concern around personalisation going forward, there are also avenues of opportunity that could see competitive advantage by early adopters. Bleier and colleagues (2020) elaborate on some of the solutions that innovative companies are bringing to the table, showing how Porter and Van Der Linde’s five forces model is in effect.

A theoretical model based on Hiatt’s (2006)ADKAR framework formed a basis for the research. From this foundation, the research unpacked the awareness aspect of change, and subsequent digital marketing strategies.

# Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology chosen for this study and the methods employed to answer the research questions. This chapter specifies the research design, sampling procedures, characteristics of the sample, the research instrument, and data collection methods. Issues concerning validity and reliability are addressed, and the ethics procedures are detailed.

## 3.1 Research approach

The chosen methodology for the study was qualitative. Qualitative methodology is most appropriate to answer the research questions, as the aim was to understand how these particular people made sense of, or made meaning from, a circumstance they are all experiencing (Creswell, W. John & Creswell, 2018). As a constructivist methodology, qualitative research positions the researcher as someone setting out to understand participants' contexts and experiences. The objective was to obtain information from persons experiencing this specific phenomenon from an individual perspective, namely, what has happened and what it means to them. This would provide a detailed description from the human level, making this suitable to understand digital marketers' awareness and experiences of cookie deprecation.

The assumptions of qualitative research design are that there will be different perspectives sought, and that asking open-ended research questions allows participants to speak freely. This enables the researcher to obtain detailed, novel insights to their work, providing a complex and robust description to the study to address the propositions outlined.

## 3.2 Research design

The study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which has three influences alluding to experiences and interpretation, including phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (Charlick et al., 2016; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). IPA aims to unpack how individuals make sense of a specific experience or phenomenon. Contextualising this information within a specific

environment provides relevant and useful findings on the topic (Charlick et al., 2016). In this study's instance, allowing the researcher to take an in-depth view of the change experienced by digital marketers and their action plans going forward. The aim was to gauge awareness about the circumstance, to understand the impact that cookie deprecation had on the day-to-day work for marketers. By understanding experiences in a closer level of detail one was able to understand this issue from the digital marketer's perspective.

The advantages of IPA included a deeper understanding of an individual's experiences; however, the interpretive approach led to a level of trust needed from the researcher as well as the participant, as responses are subjective. Further, Shinebourne (2011) elaborated that preconceptions could vary in the process of interpretation causing interpretation to be dynamic and iterative. For this study, understanding a digital marketer's perspective was crucial, it was also cognisant of the dynamism of participants to the survey and the fact that not all participants will be aware of the changes in marketing, leading to varied perspectives and approaches to marketing strategies.

## 3.3 Population and sample

The population of study in this research were digital marketers who work in various areas of the digital marketing practice and held different roles. The sample comprised of digital marketers from various industries and organisations, namely banking, telecoms, media agencies, consultancies and others. This meant the data represented in-depth views from different disciplines. Since cookie deprecation is a relatively new concept, specialists who focus on areas such as programmatic media buying, analytics, tracking and data provided an interesting view on awareness of change based on their world views and proposed marketing strategies going forward. The views combined also provided gaps that digital marketers could consider, and opportunities for competitor advantage.

The use of a non-probability sampling method, purposive sampling, ensured that the individuals who were approached about the study fit the criteria (Daniel, 2012). This method was most suitable for the exploratory nature of this study – these are individuals with specialised skills in a niche field, and for the scope of this

research, a small, illustrative sample was adequate. It is also important to consider that this qualitative study did not need a representative sample, and the procedure was not complicated to operationalise (Daniel, 2012). The people approached for the research were subject-matter experts in their specific fields within digital marketing and were expected to have some knowledge about new advancements in the industry. Digital marketers from varying fields were targeted for data variability, considering different angles of awareness of cookie deprecation. Recruiting this contrast of people provided variety and gravity to the study (Etikan et al., 2016).

Participants fell into one of three sample categories: digital marketer, digital media specialist, and digital analytics specialists. All participants volunteered to participate. Even though each participant had different job titles, their common trait was that they worked in digital marketing, making the sample homogenous. The table three describes participants' industry and job level/title.

**Table 3 Sample characteristics**

| Participants | Industry | Title |
|---|---|---|
| Digital Marketer A | Banking | Executive Head |
| Digital Marketer B | Telecoms | Senior Manager |
| Digital Marketer C | Technology | Regional Head |
| Digital Marketer D | SaaS Cloud | Account Executive |
| Digital Analytics Specialist A | Aviation | Senior specialist |
| Digital Analytics Specialist B | Banking | Senior specialist |
| Digital Analytics Specialist C | Banking | Executive head |
| Digital Analytics Specialist D | Entertainment | Director |
| Digital Media Specialist A | Digital media agency | Senior specialist |
| Digital Media Specialist B | Technology | Senior specialist |
| Digital Media Specialist C | Digital media agency | Senior specialist |
| Digital Media Specialist D | Technology | Mid- tier specialist |

## 3.4 Data collection methods

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended question. The focus was to elicit information in detail of a digital marketer's experience and views. A list of questions (Interview Guide Appendix A) directed the interviews. This semi-structured method gives the participant the latitude to discuss whatever comes to mind for them, or what they feel is relevant or important, while retaining focus on the interview topic (Bryman, 2012). The collection method was inductive by nature as it used the participant's responses to direct the conversation (Kyngäs, 2020). The open nature of an interview, even so structured as this, allowed the participant to express their thoughts and experiences and provided a deeper understanding of the nature of the phenomena under study.

## 3.5 The research instrument

A semi-structured interview approach was taken for the study, asking open-ended questions pertaining to the awareness of cookie deprecation and how the participants intended to approach marketing strategies going forward. Appendix A provides the interview questions. The questions are divided into themes addressing awareness and marketing strategies. The awareness section was to gauge whether the participant was aware of the change and if they understood the meaning of cookie deprecation. The interview moved into ways to explore how digital marketers can improve their understanding. Probing questions were used to obtain more focused, fine-tuned knowledge of a participant's experience, aligning with the IPA method (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The interview guide included two technical questions pertaining to the marketing funnel and asking about the participant's awareness of Google's roll out plan to phase out cookies. This was to gauge the level of understanding of the changes. Lastly, the participant was asked about their perceptions of gaps in the industry, and they were thanked for their participation and time.

## 3.6 Procedure for data collection

After the research proposal was accepted, ethics clearance was granted (appendix B). The researcher used LinkedIn to find people in their network who fit

the research criteria. These people were contacted using LinkedIn's mail feature and conventional email. The message included a brief description of the research objectives and scope and invited participation. After responses were received, communication continued with further explanation about the study. If a person agreed to participate, they were sent an information letter (appendix C). Volunteers lived in different parts of the country; thus, it was decided to conduct the interviews over video calls. Volunteers were invited to ask questions for clarity, and thereafter provided consent to the interview, and for it to be recorded. A digital signature sufficed for the consent form (appendix D).

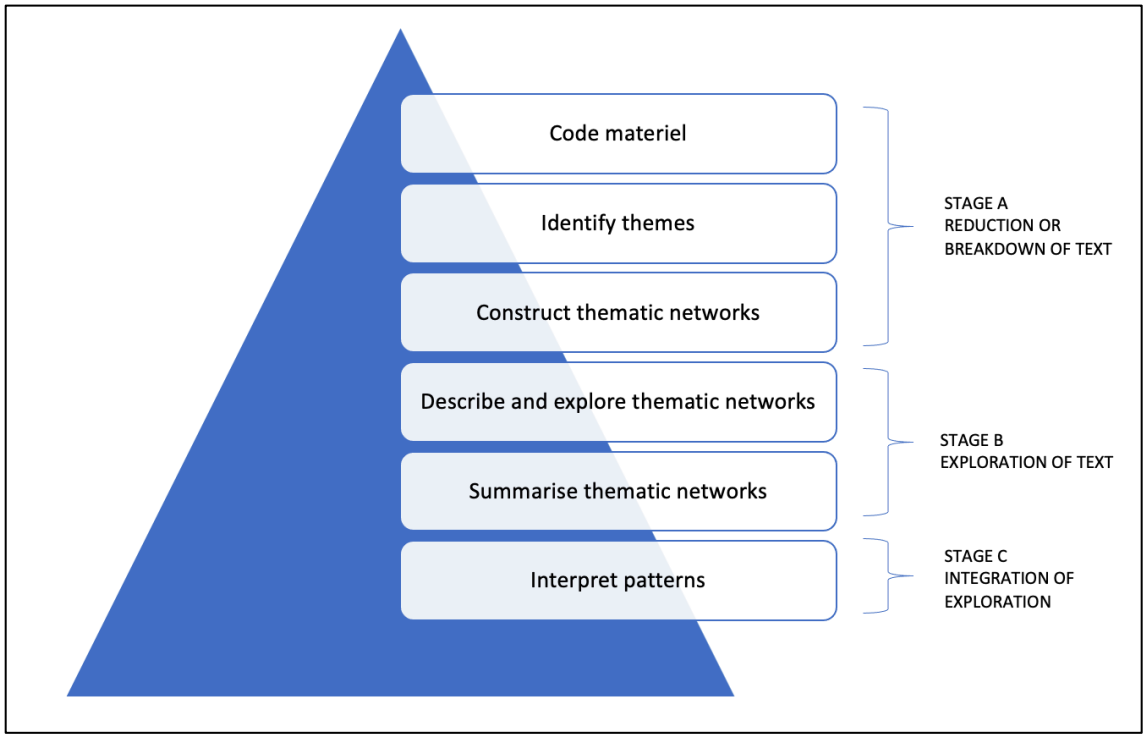
The researcher and participant arranged a suitable time for the interview which was conducted over Microsoft Teams. This application was specifically chosen for its ability to record the video call, and an accessibility feature that converts speech to text. Interviews averaged a 30-minute duration. The speech-to-text transcription was checked for accuracy and then uploaded onto Nvivo version 14 (Lumivero, 2023), a qualitative data management software.

## 3.7 Data analysis strategies and interpretation

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis. This method allows the researcher to draw insights from the data to establish patterns and provides the flexibility to connect data to conclusions. Themes created from the data are a crucial component to analyse participants' experiences. Supporting IPA, the thematic analysis aimed to not only understand experiences, but examine how events and realities effects the patterns of interview content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data was organised using Nvivo, which facilitates the coding and creation of themes. A thematic network analysis developed by Attride-Stirling (2001) was used to make connections in data. The process is depicted in figure six. The outcome was a "web-like illustration" of themes making the interpretation simpler and more robust.

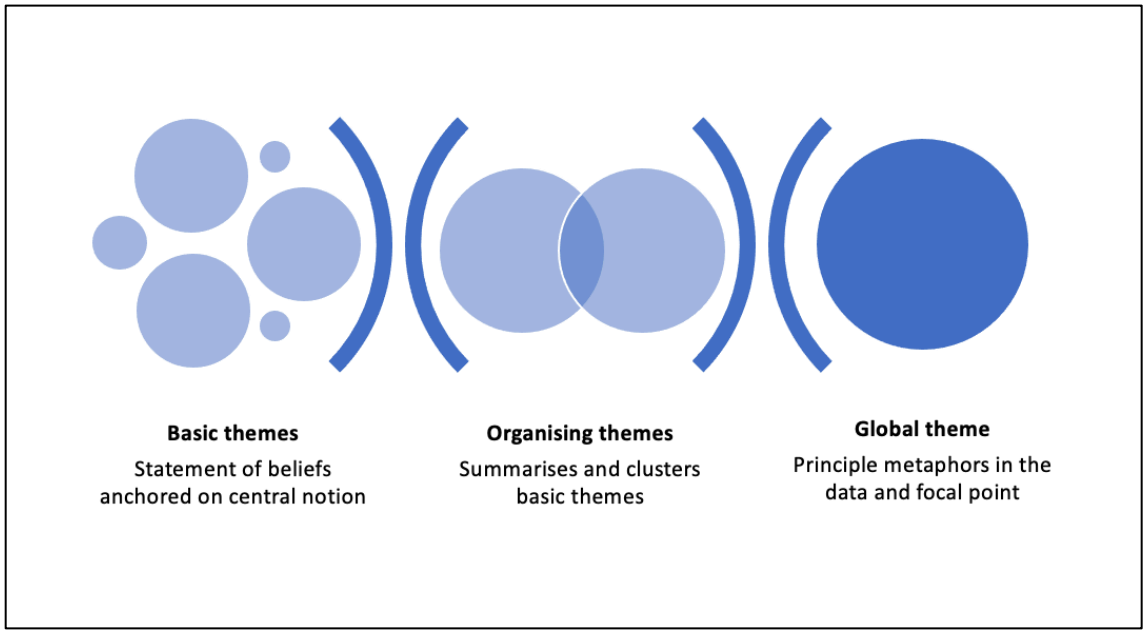
**Figure 6 Thematic Network Analysis** (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.391)




Attride-Stirling (2001) describes the process as numerous steps divided into three stages. Stage A starts with coding the material. Coding is a way of labelling or indexing the different parts of data so that the researcher can make sense of content (Elliott, 2018). The second step compiles the segments into themes and refines these by comparing and contrasting, showing similarities and differences, and indicating parts that provide novel or unexpected ideas. This process can be both inductive and deductive, meaning the researcher's analysis is guided by the data, or there is already a set of codes or themes that the researcher looks for in the data. Step three involves drawing up the network, arranging themes into a map/ diagram indicating connections. Basic themes can be combined to form global themes resulting in a network view as depicted in figure seven.

Stage B describes and explores the network, providing an appropriate summary. Stage C provides interpretation of the patterns.

**Figure 7 Structure of a thematic network** (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.388)




## 3.8 Quality Assurance and Rigour

### *3.8.1 Transferability*

Transferability refers to qualitative research containing enough detail and description of the population, methods and data so that a reader can transfer findings to a different context (Morse, 2015). This study specifically focused on the issue of cookie deprecation for digital marketers, thus it would not be immediately applicable to other contexts. Clear details on procedure have been provided such that a reader can draw conclusions and make connections to their respective context and research question.

### *3.8.2 Credibility*

Tracy, pp. (2010, pp. 842 & 843) talks about the credibility of a study being "plausible and persuasive" through "thick descriptions". This requires adequate explanations of the context such that a reader understands the interpretations the researcher makes from the participants' different perspectives. Thematic network analysis was conducive to providing a level of detail that supports the plausibility of

claims by focusing on the content of the data and making comparisons among participants. The credibility of the report is based on the results being applied to real-world situations beyond specific conditions of the study. The study was carefully designed to minimise biases, confounding concepts and ideas that counterbalance each other along with transparent reporting in the thematic analysis.

### *3.8.3 Dependability*

Dependability relates to enabling a reader to follow the researcher's thought process and understand the decisions made for the steps followed (Morse, 2015). This report explained the purpose of the study, the specificity of the chosen sample to give insight to the research questions, described the processes followed, and discussed and interpreted findings. The research supervisor also played an important role in this, serving as an additional reviewer and being a sounding board.

## 3.9 Ethical considerations

The research received ethics clearance from the school (WBS/DB2495297/508), to ensure that all practices met requirements for ethical research practice. Participants were invited to be part of the research, neither forced nor coerced. All participants volunteered and were made aware of their rights as research participants. Participants were also given clear information about the research, what they would be asked to do, what the research is for, and what will be done with their data. This allowed participants to provide informed consent. They were provided an information letter that contained all relevant information about the research, including the contact details of the researcher, their supervisor, and the relevant ethics committee should any queries arise. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research without any repercussions or negative effects to them.

The interviews were arranged for a time that was suitable for the participants, meaning that their work and other responsibilities would not be impeded by the research. Participants were asked for consent to record their interviews. It was explained clearly to them that the recordings would not be made available to anyone – only the researcher would have access. The recordings and transcripts were

stored on a password protected computer accessed only by the researcher and backed-up on a private cloud. None of their personal information would be shared by the researcher, and their real names and organisations are obfuscated in the research report. All data recordings will be destroyed after one year.

# Chapter 4: Presentation Of Findings

## 4.1 Introduction

The results are presented in this chapter in three different ways. The first is an explanation of themes according to each research proposition. The second is the arrangement of data into categories or organising themes, and the third is a summary of findings. The data were analysed using thematic network analysis. The direct quotations are pertinent examples to demonstrate themes.

## 4.2 Findings pertaining to Proposition 1

Proposition one speaks to a digital marketer's awareness of cookie deprecation and the changing landscape of data in the digital realm. The interview posed questions about awareness, such as what participants understand about cookie deprecation, their perception of marketers' knowledge about these changes, how organisations address these privacy concerns, and what to expect as an alternative to cookie tracking from tech giants. Figure eight illustrates the awareness of cookie deprecation cluster, comprised of awareness, privacy, and change.

### *4.2.1 Awareness of cookie deprecation*

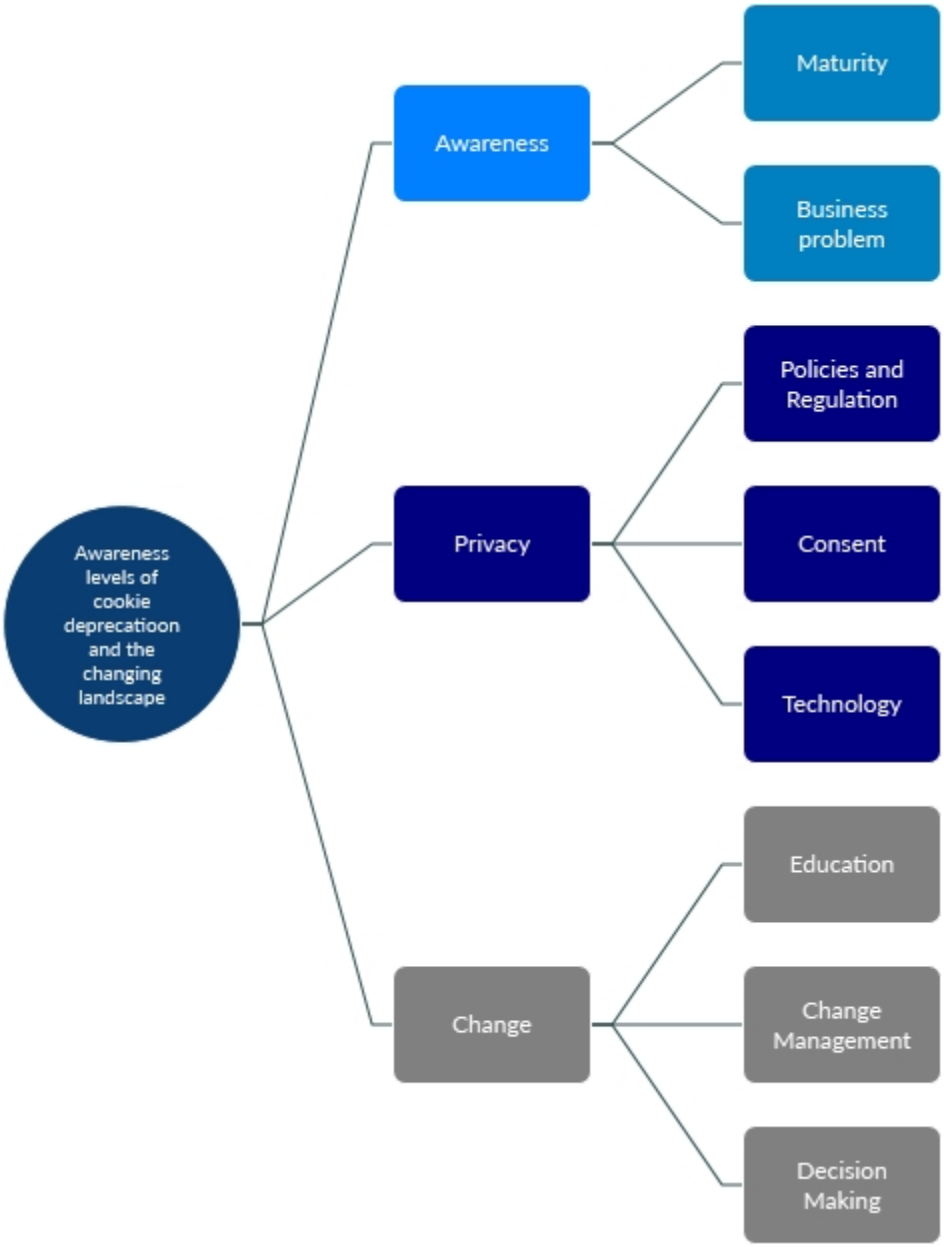
Awareness levels were perceived as moderate to low, indicating that some are aware of the approaching change, while others are not sure what to do about it. A focus on a digital marketer's maturity came to the fore:

> "*It depends on how we have been approaching it, and it is based on the brand or the marketer's maturity levels*" – **Media Specialist C.**

Another participant specified that they

> *"wouldn't just blame marketers, policies (referring to POPIA) took a while to be implemented and there was quite a bit of confusion around data processing, owning the data, the user etc."* **Analytics Specialist C**.

**Figure 8 Proposition 1 theme clusters**




The participant further elaborated that Google's timelines contributed to the confusion, meaning that awareness levels and maturity in the field is low. A perception was that general data literacy is low, where one participant explained:

> *"'I'm sure half of the fraternity would probably struggle to explain a cookie, or even just the concept. Digital marketers are aware of the term third-party cookie crumbling, but they probably think it is all cookies, and though everyone accepts the cookie deprecating, people*

*don't fundamentally understand it's role – there are different types of cookies." -* ***Analytics Specialist C***

This was unfortunately exemplified by one digital marketer who showed confusion as to whether it was first-party or third-party cookies being deprecated. While the lack of a basic understanding of the eco-system was highlighted as a challenge because of the many parties involved and affected, it was also said that people involved in operational aspects of marketing may have a better understanding, showing possible hope for some. For those on the frontline of digital marketing, confusion prevails with uncertainty about what the impact will be. When considering various sectors, a media specialist said:

> *"The financial industry might be more aware of the changes since they themselves are heavily regulated, so abiding to policy and reregulation will be a given. FMCG and educational institutions are not completely aware or up to date, and companies that are direct clients to large agencies are often ahead of the pack due to agencies that are in the know (often this is Google's B2B offering). –* ***Media Specialist A***

In reference to re-marketing using third-party data, one marketer stated that some are aware,

> *"...but because it's such a slow engine, they are just watching because why would you want to turn off a program of work for yourself that you feel is working for you" -* ***Digital Marketer D***

This particular digital marketer believed that the information exists in the world, but it needs to be demystified, since many are struggling to reconcile 'what it means for me.' At this time, there is little and limited knowledge about pivoting or switching from using third-party data to first-party data. People understand that privacy is important: that part of it has landed. But, the implications, and how to bridge that divide, have not landed. Yet. Those who are curious are clued up, but traditional marketers are in the dark.

### *4.2.2 Privacy and Technology*

Technology giants have instituted changes to how they collect user data by phasing out cookie tracking, while Google is still rolling out changes and testing new alternatives to third-party cookie tracking. When asked about what organisations have done to maintain privacy of personal information, the overall sentiment was mixed. Some organisations are ahead in terms of privacy control and adaptations, and others have not yet started the process. One observation was that larger organisations are more equipped to comply to regulation and are very often held more accountable than smaller companies. An analyst from a large leading financial organisation explained:

> *"The first thing we did was set up privacy guidelines and a privacy office within the organisation"* - ***Analytics Specialist C***

Within their ambit, they identified their use of customer data and personal information and ensured that risk, legal, and compliance teams were made aware of data use and management, and how this data was utilised for marketing purposes. Having controls in place establishes a safe, transparent and private environment where data flows seamlessly from the customer to the marketer. This organisation was further ahead than others regarding readiness for cookie deprecation.

Digital marketer B, from a large leading telecommunications organisation explained that in their department, privacy controls were still in their infancy, and that they did not yet have a privacy officer. The differences between these two organisations indicate that some, but not all, large organisations have privacy controls in place. It is debatable whether awareness uniformly exists across the industry.

Stemming from privacy conversations, consent is another change that has taken the marketing world by storm and is a considerable area of concern surfacing from users' personal data. Cookie consent pop-ups have been introduced to many websites to request explicit consent from the user.

> *“You don’t leave it up to assumption that the customer wants to be contacted in a certain way or wants a certain offer if you haven’t actually asked for that consent.” -* ***Digital Marketer D***

It is imperative that there is a clear understanding of what consent means and what to do with it. An awareness and knowledge of how this changing approach to privacy impacts both customer and organisation.

> *“How do we make it worth a customer’s time to consent?”… “what are those things that make a customer come back?” -* ***Digital Marketer A***

These are the questions that digital marketers grapple with but only have partial answers to. A noteworthy comment stated how strategy surrounding consent is pertinent, but this is a separate at company level:

> *“How is your broader consent strategy as an organisation linking to marketing and comms consent because those are two different things”.* ***Analytics Specialist D***

Consent management tools are available and in use at some organisations to ensure responsible data collection and appropriate management of consent. Overall, there is a general appreciation for consent, even with so little understanding of context.

> *“Digital born companies are seen to evolve quicker and are first movers when it comes to operating under a privacy safe environment.”* ***Media Specialist D***

Privacy needs to be baked into everything digital marketers do. On the contrary, companies with longer tenure are challenged by new technological changes and, because of legacy systems, the adoption rate is slower, placing these companies in compromised, unfortunate positions.

A digital marketer spoke about the perception that technology will solve business problems when it comes to privacy, causing unfavourable impacts on the awareness of cookie deprecation and its repercussions. This arose from the over

reliance on and desire for new technology to solve potential challenges. Adoption of the technology and ensuring that it aligns with strategy is challenging.

> *"Why do we chase the 'what', chase the 'why', in our space we are bombarded by thousands and thousands of tech, so it's easy to get overwhelmed, but what are we actually doing to solve the why."* – ***Analytics Specialist D***

An analytics specialist spoke to marketing technology being used for business in a broader sense -

> *"If you take the lens of a marketer, then you have to have relationships in the business that align to your marketing activity. This is applicable in the product and service space and the digital marketer needs to hook into these."* – ***Analytics Specialist D***

Whether it is the absence or proliferating use of technology, there is an acknowledgement that manual information processing in organisations creates challenges for maintaining privacy. With the involvement of the human element, mistakes can happen, data can be leaked, frameworks can be overlooked and consent (regarding to opting in and opting out) are not managed effectively. There is a level of responsibility when it comes to using and processing data, whether it be in the manual or automatic state. People shy away from the responsibility partly because of a lack of knowledge, but also because of the risk involved in making mistakes. Training for new procedures is seen as a 'box-ticking' exercise and people do not understand the practical and legal implications of the changes.

### *4.2.3 Change*

Change in this context raises key points of consideration, deeming it a crucial factor in the face of cookie deprecation. For all participants, change was a prevalent theme. Every participant demonstrated a notion of change as either positive anticipation or weary anxiety. Change management was highlighted, drawing attention to how digital marketers support their staff, with the possibility of teaching them to cope and adopt change. Most participants, however, spoke change

experienced in a personal setting. They provided views on how to adapt to change. One mentioned that:

> *"Less is more, focus on the fundamentals and the foundations because we get caught up by trends and we don't focus on building on the basics to make sure what we are doing is actually working".* ***Media Specialist C***

Some marketers advise their peers to be brave as marketers are often reluctant to go on new journeys. It was emphasised that in order for a digital marketer to stay abreast of change, there should be constantly reading up, learning and upskilling to try and understand what the changes mean, also try to understand the martech that the company already possesses, and garner insights from there.

> *"Try to have as much data as possible to give you insights for what you need to do".* ***Digital Marketer B***

It is important to test new forms of technology: the concept of play, test and measure came to the fore, merging everyday life scenarios with actual online digital elements.

> *"Go into action mode, reading and debating is good, but start driving proof of concepts to try it for yourself, have a view of what your peers and competitors are doing but also try it for yourself."* ***Digital Marketer A***

> *"There is a perception that digital marketers know everything, but the reality is that we don't, we've got to first read and learn before we can make recommendations".* ***Digital Marketer A***

Change is a part of progress, and sometimes, educating people about change is overlooked. Being open-minded to change and recognising its utility was a passion point of media specialist D:

> *"The core principles of digital marketing have remained the same which is to provide the right message to the right user at the right time,*

*sometimes innovation doesn't mean it's brand new, it just means doing something differently."* - ***Media Specialist D***

Change was identified as good and needed for advancing. Once digital marketers understand the benefits of change, and those benefits are clearly communicated, it will become easier for people to want to learn and to get buy in.

With change comes specificities, such as generative artificial intelligence, large language processing, and robots - some believe these advances will replace their jobs. These technologies drive change but the question was raised: how do we flip our mindsets in creating value for customers using this type of technology?

*"First-mover advantages in those environments will really yield better results, always have an inquisitive but deep data mindset and use insight".* - ***Analytics Specialist C***

Having the foresight and picking your head up from your usual day to day work will enable vision and practice.

## 4.3 Results pertaining to Proposition 2

Proposition two unpacks how digital marketers approach their strategies in anticipation of Google's third-party cookie phase out, and if lie any opportunities there. Interview questions focused on the understanding of personalisation, a digital strategy that contemplates the privacy-personalisation paradox, and whether a digital marketer can find any advantages in cookie deprecation. The results shown in a personalisation network, comprising of three clusters: strategy, data, and personalisation. Figure nine illustrates this thematic network.

**Figure 9 Proposition 2 theme clusters**




### *4.3.1 Strategy*

Digital marketers stand in an interesting position putting them in a conundrum: how to approach cookie deprecation in marketing strategies. Industry projections are that people need to understand that cookie deprecation is not the end of digital marketing. It is the start of producing much more intelligent marketing.

> *“80% of your income comes from 20% of your customers.” -* ***Digital Marketer D***

This means that targeted communication and advertising using customer data remains crucial. Objectives need to be crisp and clear before strategy development:

> *“What are we all trying to achieve?”* ***Media Specialist C***

Strategy building must be suitable for the individual’s place in the marketing funnel:

> *“If it is an awareness play then you’d go to the open market, but if we are going to be driving something like leads and conversions, then you’d want to be in the middle of the funnel and the bottom of the funnel in which case you would use some of your customer data”.* ***Analytics Specialist C***

Customers need consent to their data being collected and used, and to be informed of *how* this data will be used. Transparency about data, and working with respective compliance teams, is pivotal to developing future digital marketing strategies.

> *“The expectation typically means that the more I’m engaged with you, the more that I have consented to you knowing more of me”.* ***Media Specialist D***

Customers have become accustomed to receiving relevant content from advertising strategy that does not create waste nor frustrate potential customers through ‘spray and pray’ methods. Marketers can lose a lot of money by marketing the wrong info to the wrong audience,

> *“While you think you are collecting a lot of data and you’ve got a lot of responses; you’re probably wasting a lot of targeted data where you can probably do a lot more”.* ***Analytics Specialist A***

By leveraging the data towards personalised advertising, marketers avoid ‘spraying and praying.’ Cookie deprecation is forcing marketers to be a lot more

considerate and to hold a better understanding of the value they are trying to drive for their business. The messaging and communication strategies also need to be challenged, as the precision of language that feeds into targeted strategies influences accuracy conversations.

Precision marketing came to the fore and even though the quality of this technique might diminish over time from cookies being phased out, marketers need to find more accurate ways of measurement. There are different segments in the market, so finding solutions for them in digital marketing strategy enables a more targeted approach, specifically in re-marketing. Digital strategies that encompass deep audience-building prove to be more successful.

> *"You'd want to see people with attributes similar to customers that you have and then build out audiences you can potentially reach, one can cross sell and upsell through retention strategies and propensity modelling including next best action becomes key. In this way you move away from doing marketing for marketing sake and begin to have conversations with existing customers in a more contextual, relevant way."* - ***Analytics Specialist D***

Media specialist B, who works at a large tech firm, explained that attribution in a digital strategy will be the biggest challenge for marketers. In a hypothetical world where third-party cookies have diminished, first-party data is murky, and with no opportunity to identify a client through Facebook or Google, one needs to find a way through the existing relationships with clients and reach them through unique channels. Once they engage with marketing collateral, there is the opportunity to take over and personalise. Marketing relationships can still be established. A seasoned digital marketer added:

> *"Theoretically, building a strategy on first-party data nudges you to ask poignant questions such as, am I going to get more revenue or leads, can we reduce the cost of acquisition, or does this increase the cost of acquisition."* - ***Digital Marketer A***

Digital media specialist B spoke to the fact that it will get harder and harder to explain the effectiveness and the return on ad spend to boards and CEO's. Re-marketing is usually used as a technique to capture an already interested person through digital media. It is a technique that strongly adds to the return on spend in a digital marketing strategy. It has heavily relied on cookies to be able to find and serve the user with relevant information. In this situation, asking what would work in the place of re-marketing, evoked participants to talk about the use of first-party data, accessing logged in environments and plugging into the correct platforms. A media specialist who used re-marketing as part of campaigns indicated that:

> *"The opportunity to identify users will be challenging and there has been an over-reliance on the cookie for audience targeting through the years."* – ***Media Specialist C***

Media specialist A indicated remarketing/retargeting is an exciting space to be in and that it is only a matter of time before it picks up as an alternate to third-party cookies. It is also an opportunity to get creative and build on other channels, such as digital out-of-home media and navigator apps for prospecting larger audiences. Tracking advertising effectiveness and making links to existing CRM data enables personalised advertising without using third-party data.

> *"Your retargeting will always be indicative of you being able to understand the customer life cycle within a business".* – ***Media Specialist A***

An analyst alluded to the fact that in their experience, re-marketing has been a fail-safe, and digital marketers have used this technique to bring in prospective leads, showing value to the business. Not having this technique is going make a changing landscape even more challenging.

> *"We are going to be forced to think outside of the box, and we've got to be smarter about how and what we do".* - ***Digital Marketer C***

In an organisation, *internally*, there must be closer alignment between marketing and product offering, so that driving conversion without re-marketing is not such a mountain of work to do.

### *4.3.2 Data*

Data is a topic of discussion throughout the interviews. Interestingly, it was the most discussed topic among all participants. The importance of data is crystalised and an analyst, who also practices as a citizen data scientist, eloquently explained:

> *"Whether you start with data first or your marketing strategy first, whatever it is, at the end of the day you're going to be using data."* - ***Digital Analyst A***

Data is a dominant feature of the marketing strategy conversation. The flow of data, from business to campaign and vice versa, feeds into models for campaign strategies. A digital marketer provided an example of their current situation:

> *"We've got millions of active subscribers that interact with our product, but 95% of them are on USD channels, so we are obviously trying to take the existing data that we have to either convert people onto the app or people that are already transacting on the app, we're trying to get them to stay loyal and active users. It's very hard to do that, we cannot use their data for advertising purposes because they have not previously consented to marketing, data is also anonymised so it is starting from scratch for us". –* ***Digital Marketer B***

Marketer B further indicated that oftentimes, there is a challenge with understanding the data that exists and how to use it in marketing campaigns. A common theme surfacing is how data is stitched from business teams, as they hold a lot of the real data insights, to get a better view of the customer. Having first-party data in the form of name, surname and email address is one aspect, but marrying it with interests and attributes can make first-party data go further and truly make a difference in marketing strategies. This is what will count. A three-dimensional view of a customer is integral to understanding how they tap into various products within an organisation. This is one way of looking at it, but

> *"People also have side hustles and selling products in their own businesses, they are parents, what interest bucket do we put this customer in, are they an online shopper or physical shopper?* Then

only will you start understanding behaviour to pre-empt how you market to individuals." - ***Digital Marketer A***

Having the relationships with business partners is the special link, along with data science capabilities, to understand behaviours from tapping into first-party data.

> *"A data orchestration strategy is crucial in that a marketer should understand what they are gathering, what the audience strategy is as well as a data activation strategy.* As a marketer, a first-party data strategy is thought to be the biggest advantage*".* ***Analytics Specialist D***

In larger, older, more mature organisations, a plethora of first-party data exists. Analytics specialist A indicated that in their organisation, they are building up transactional data and loyalty programs, and using this first-party data for marketing strategies. Many organisations are quite protective of their data, and others are not sure what to do with it; people have expressed anxiety when talking about data and how to use it. Important to note, as identified by one participant who works at a technology company,

> *"Everything is hashed*[2] *before it goes into our systems, and we endeavour to build a solid and responsible framework."* – ***Media Specialist B***

The realisation is that marketers can only use customer data for the purpose that the customer had consented to. It is an intriguing prospect that there will be new challenges to securing prospective customers and collecting, storing, and using this data.

Customer data platforms that have surfaced have been identified as environments where the customer is modelled, creating opportunities to leverage the data by building suitable campaigns. In the minds of some digital marketers, the onboarding of a CDP tool is encouraging and could solve a lot of the challenges that come with data. Media specialist C mentioned that even though customer data

[2] The term 'hashed' meaning data is coded or protected.

platforms exist, not a lot of people know how to use them and are unsure of what they entail. There is a myriad of CDP's on the market, and it would depend on what the tech stack strategy is for the organisation. The amassing of data through CPD is usually the starting point, and onboarding aggregators or API's for integration comes with the need for knowledge and understanding of data and marketing strategies.

Data governance is the core of data management strategies, whether it be in a CDP or kept in legacy systems, or even excel documents. The general sense is that some brands are very much aware of governance and regulation around the actual data, either from an activation or collection perspective, but there is some scepticism to start playing in the space. The costs for onboarding and licence fees are a big part of the overhaul; however, the costs associated with data breaches and breaking privacy clauses outweighs the costs to manage and own the data in a safe, controlled environment, using, for example, a central customer data platform. The risk is shared when it comes to owning and using data. There are roles for data officers, controllers and processors. Marketers need to prioritise understanding the laws and regulations around the data that they are using. Media specialist A spoke to built-in mechanisms that allow marketers to understand data, usually from analytics. A marketer does not really need to interact with the data.

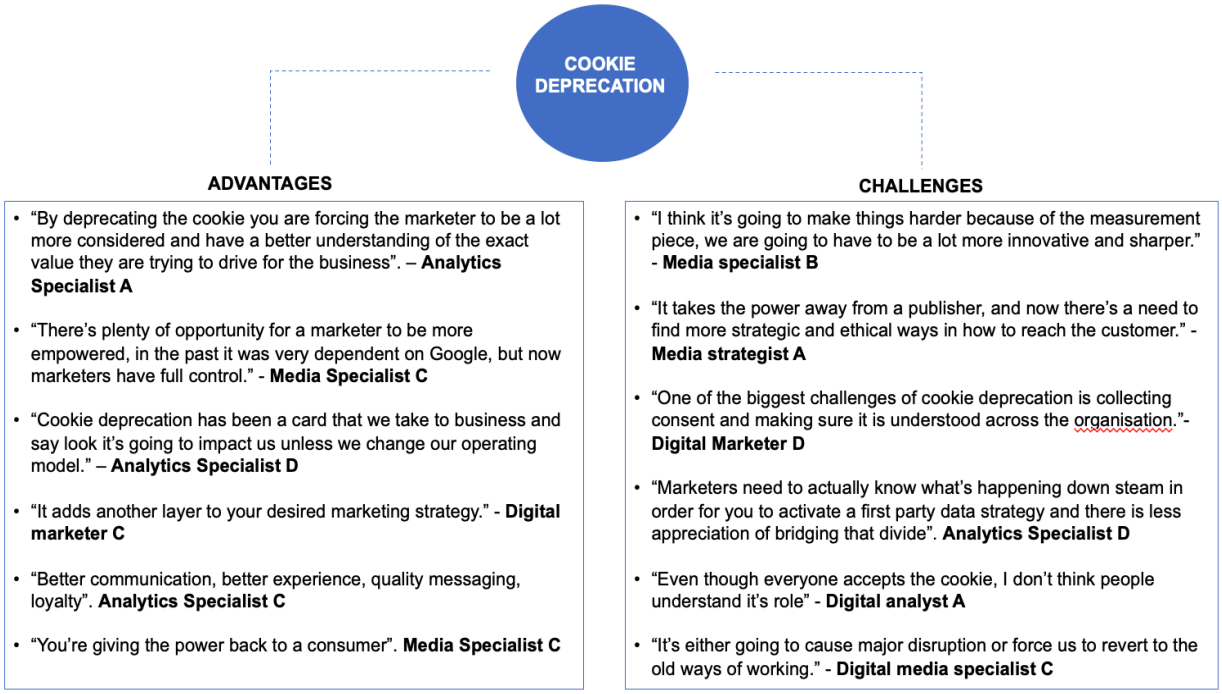
> *"All you are doing is being informed by the data and what the data can tell you". –* ***Media Specialist A***

***Cookies***

As a direct subset of the data theme, cookies were widely spoken about, prompting a few reactions some positive and others of immense concern. Figure ten shows examples of what most participants thought about the advantages and challenges of cookie deprecation, and if there are any opportunities.

While quite a few advantages were identified, not a lot of the thought-provoking comments were communicated by a digital marketing manager, most arose from the digital media specialists and the digital analysts. A few challenges were outlined which demonstrates the tension existing in the industry.

**Figure 10 Advantages and challenges of cookie deprecation quotes**




### *Technology*

In reference to possible alternate methods of user tracking and what digital marketers can expect from the tech giant Google, a participant spoke about an increased layer of protection, in for example Google Analytics 4, making it increasingly difficult to pull information on a customer. A few explained that they have no idea what to expect, and that it is going to be a whole new world when it eventually does. Digital marketer A indicated that it is a lot of 'smoke and mirrors,' which puts media specialists in a grey area with their clients.

> *"Google has encouraged us to take on products like customer match and tag manager, so they are encouraging us to plan for the future changes". –* ***Digital Marketer A***

Media specialist D spoke about Google providing a lot of the products in beta phase, with enhanced conversion being one of them.

> *"Google is good at creating a closed ecosystem that does integrations, the expectation is that they will keep it on their road map, but they will also strengthen a lot of the other areas that make it a more desirable*

*product offering. They will also offer a few privacy safe solutions, where the tech in the back end secures personal information. There are a few products in test phase and people can expect alternate methods of cookie tracking." -* ***Media Specialist D***

When probed on the actual products that will be introduced as alternatives, no participant had information to share.

### *4.3.3 Personalisation*

A digital marketers' strategic focus, whether in business-to-customer or business-to-business marketing, will always be to serve and reach customers with the right message at the right time. Participants were asked what personalisation meant to them.

> *"Personalisation is when the business or relationship that you have with the company personalises their engagement with you". –* ***Analytics Specialist A***

Key to personalisation was relationship and engagement; getting to know your customer better. Ensuring there is relevance in a message and speaking to someone based on what you know about them, which all stems from data. Marketers need to be able to understand their customers internally as an organisation to speak to customers in a familiar way online. It is about collecting data about a customer, and trying to understand what the individual is all about. A participant provided an interesting example:

> *"So while we leave bits and pieces of information about ourselves all over the show, the information is not necessarily coherent. It is very disparate; we show up as four or five different individuals for an organisation when we are actually one individual, so the first thing from a personalisation perspective, is to try and understand what the one individual looks like, not five". –* ***Digital Marketer D***

> *"Personalisation is not just bombarding me with adverts, its about navigating my decision process a whole lot better because you have all*

*my information, and you have my device ID. You know what I do, what I'm interested in, what I search for and when I search". –* ***Digital Marketer A***

Customers are not one dimensional and precision marketing is required. Another participant took an alternate view by stating,

*"Marketers often look at personalisation through a slithered lens, it's not just personalising based on the data I have about you, and the cohort that you fall into based on your behaviours. It is about understanding what the business is trying to achieve and how the customer is either going to benefit from this personalisation and who is getting more bang and buck from it, so I think of it as bi-directional." –* ***Analytics Specialist D***

There is also a fundamental difference between personalisation and customisation which a lot of marketers struggle with:

*"Personalisation is when an organisation does something on behalf of a customer verses when a customer decides for themselves which is customisation". -* ***Analytics Specialist A***

Organisations also partner with other companies to share data that can be used when understanding different variables about a customer. An example is a bank obtaining a retailers' database to leverage a customer spending patterns and to map out various data points, all in an effort to personalise offers to a customer. In this category, a majority of the participants spoke to first-party data alongside personalisation and do not view it in isolation.

## 4.4 Summary of the findings

The evidence in the data suggests that awareness of cookie deprecation exists, but understanding what to do with the upcoming change is challenging and gives little confidence to digital marketers. The practice of data privacy in organisations is seen as occurring in pockets, where it is assumed that large organisations are more compliant, but the data shows that not all large organisations

are following regulation, challenging the prevalence of awareness of cookie deprecation and privacy practices. There is an over-reliance on technology to solve these challenges in part, but the majority believe that technology can only address the ’what’ and not the ‘why’ in business context.

Although identified as a strong theme within the data, technology was identified as an outlier with regards to the awareness theme, calling this sub theme substantially different in the distribution of remaining themes. Where participants talked about change, they also talked about awareness and the content for these themes tended to overlap. Privacy has a closer connection to change and awareness, however not as disparate as the technology theme.

This topic of data privacy weighed heavily on the minds of all participants, especially with the collection of first-party cookies becoming more imminent. Participants understand first-party data being used to replace third-party data strategies and with the resulting personalisation becoming much more vital to reach the right customer at the right time. The customer is at the heart of digital strategies, and knowing enough about the customer as a marketer allows one to build effective strategies. A customer’s rights are ever-present when unpacking digital marketing strategies and being able to provide relevant services builds trust and a kind of loyalty.

Some organisations have customer insights teams who build analytics and personalisation efforts, aiming to draw the business back to defining the objective and the ‘so what’ in strategies. In the event that first-party data strategies are still gaining traction, modelling the customer with the right tools and platforms alongside leveraging data already in possession will eventually build capability.

Participants identified the advantages of cookie deprecation, but equally emphasised the challenges that accompany the change, showing an eagerness to get going with alternate methods concurrent with anxiety for the unknown. Not many digital marketers could comment on alternate methods of cookie tracking. An overall assumption is that knowledge is limited.

Interestingly, trust underscored the interviews, whether from a Google perspective or from a customer point of view. One participant mentioned:

> "*Not everyone trusts that Google will act in the best interest of their business or company and that they would have to have an intermediary or third-party that audits the marketplace".* – **Analytics Specialist A**

From a customer's point of view, marketers want to build a level of trust and the more customers trust a brand, the more they would want to engage and more willing to share information. Marketing strategies must be built around trust and ensuring that the information a customer shares is not abused.

A few opportunities were brought up, such as the impact to the bottom line of a business. If alternate methods are successful, colourful opportunities present themselves such as building of closer look-a-like audiences that have the potential to convert and contribute to revenue streams. Organisations can end up reducing financial waste from advertising spend. Data can be re-used and retention strategies can be built so that the customer lifetime value (CLV) extends and increases in scope. With the use of first-party data, matched with clearly identifiable attributes and traits, insights become unrivalled. Next best action is within reach, and business can boom. The opportunity for the role of a digital marketer is to get a seat at the table where relevance matters.

# Chapter 5: Discussion Of Findings

## 5.1 Introduction

The goal of this study was to understand digital marketers' awareness of cookie deprecation alongside privacy and personalisation in the South African context. This chapter discusses and interprets findings from the interview data. The two propositions are scrutinised along with reference to literature to interpret similarities and differences, arguments, and propositions.

## 5.2 Discussion pertaining to Proposition 1

### *5.2.1 Awareness*

The first proposition aimed to understand whether there was a general awareness of cookie deprecation among South African marketers. Awareness, as evidenced by data, is moderate to low as most are aware of the change but few are not sure what to do about it. Buchholz (2022) suggested that cookie deprecation is a blow to marketers, who now need to consider different methods in purchasing behavioural information from browser operators instead of tracking the bulk of browser cookies. Buchholz (2022) did not refer to general awareness about deprecation, but there was reference to the magnitude of the change, and that digital marketers need to make the connection between privacy and personalisation and resist only considering it when the compliance conversation arises.

From an alternate angle, Oksanen (2022) explained that cookie deprecation is a reality and organisations are aware of privacy protection through regulation. However, not all are aware that online marketing strategies will need to change to comply with regulation. Oksanen (2022) spoke to organisations' maturity levels through the third- party cookie maturity model. The model indicates that first-party data scored the highest, and the lowest was developing marketing measurement leading to digital marketing strategies. Interestingly, this study found significant similarities to Oksanen (2022). Digital marketers' maturity surfaced within the awareness cluster in proposition one, suggesting that low maturity contributes to low awareness of cookie deprecation. Maturity could mean lack of knowledge,

experience, skill and capability. Rogers and colleagues (2021) say that the race belongs to the swift - CMO's understand the potential upside of digital marketing maturity and the diminishing role of third-party cookies. Companies with high digital maturity are more than twice as likely to grow market share.

Much like Oksanen (2022), first-party data was ubiquitous as an approach to digital marketing strategies. Rogers and colleagues (2021) reinforce this concept by highlighting that it is crucial to build a virtuous cycle around first-party data to address privacy concerns and maintain customer value and trust.

Confusion surrounding cookie deprecation, types of cookies and the role cookies play was a concern for a few participants. Some sectors are seen as more ahead in making changes than others, and while there are pockets of individuals who have more advanced understanding of the change, the vast majority are struggling to de-mystify information. This mirrors a report by Adweek (2022) indicating that marketers are unprepared for a world without cookies, turning the spotlight on negative connotations, and fears about the future. Jayakumar (2021) found that the lack of awareness of the benefits of cookies raised questions about whether users are informed enough to give consent for their cookies to be used. Though this research is outside the South African context and focuses specifically on the benefits of cookies and users providing consent, the lack of awareness in the field persists. One must contemplate: if website users are not aware about the benefits of cookie consent, should digital marketers (usually also website owners) not be more than a little au fait with cookies, their benefits and even their deprecation? The data in this study suggests otherwise. Digital marketers are not sufficiently aware of cookies and what to do when they are eventually phased out. If digital marketers are not fully aware of the change, marketing practices will be impacted, and so too will an organisation's bottom line.

### *5.2.2 Privacy*

Privacy plays a significant role in how a digital marketer understands cookie deprecation. Privacy is the bedrock of the demise of cookies. Privacy also acts as a kick starter for organisations to think about data protection and compliance to POPIA. Without an understanding of privacy, there is a limited awareness about

cookie deprecation and its implications. The study's findings come from a mixed sample of participants working in organisations that have embraced the privacy question. Some are in their infancy while others are further ahead as they have implemented privacy officers or data officers.

The literature, however, motivates for having the right measures and controls in place *within* the organisation as it makes the customers' transition to accepting cookies painless. Informing the data subject of how their data is going to be used aids in them accepting cookies (Manyame, 2020). Providing the right information to a customer is a key component to privacy, as the POPI Act (2013) reiterates that everyone has the right to privacy. Regulation and legislation project an ideal end-state and a forward-thinking view. However, the reality presented in this study suggests that companies are still finding their feet when it comes to privacy. This study also provides indications that digital marketers have not been fully onboarded with privacy controls, and marketing strategies have not yet adapted to address privacy concerns.

Participants in this study also spoke to the smaller, digital-born companies who possess a unique type of agility when it comes to implementing privacy controls, without the burden of legacy systems in place that hamper new technology to address privacy concerns. Some literature indicates alternate views: In a US study, it was found that start-ups who do not specialize in identity or anonymity do not view privacy as a core business strategy or a top concern. Some entrepreneurs believe in 'building the plane while flying it approach' - as business grows, so should privacy policies and practices (Chen et al., 2018). Innovation- and technology-related companies often lack established data protection best practices (Norval et al., 2021) – there is a disparity between the GDPR requirements and a start-up approach. Start-ups face misconceptions and associated risks (Norval et al., 2021). A Sub-Saharan study discussed how Fintechs are often data intensive, and as a result, data protection rules are critical for their operation. Certain privacy laws, however, are often hard to navigate and fail to deal with the tension between data sharing and control of data. Fintechs have also attracted significant regulatory attention and are often associated with regulatory oversight (Didenko, 2017).

Whether large or small, traditional, or innovative, there are companies that have embraced regulation and those who do not have an inclination of how to start. The same applies to marketers within these organisations: privacy cascades down to a marketer's world, and strategies must onboard privacy regulation. In his study of awareness of cookie deprecation, Oksanen (2022) asserts that organisations have the awareness component of privacy through the various regulations, but not all are aware of how marketing strategies will need to change to accommodate privacy nor how to comply with regulation. An unassuming example shared by a seasoned Digital Media Specialist reveals that corporates occasionally share CRM data (sometimes through email) with an advertising agency, hoping for the agency to use this data in digital campaigns. This data is then fed into ad platforms. Data at any point could be breached at the client side, agency side, or tech platform side, which violates privacy rights.

Marketers have a long way to go in terms of incorporating privacy within the strategic focus of campaigns, including first-party data considerations, re-marketing, personalisation and one-to-one marketing, demand generation, and performance marketing. Moreso, campaign orchestration and execution must address privacy, whether it be running privacy-led campaigns or using intelligent technology to aid in regulated advertising.

Participants remarked that digital marketers heavily rely on technology to store and use data to support digital campaigns. Google (2022) acknowledges that the type of technology they are developing addresses privacy concerns, while still enabling advertising. Google is looking at new web standards with safer alternatives. Utilising optimal technology is a step in the right direction, but like one participant noted, digital marketers often solve for the 'what' referring to technology, instead of the 'why' referring to solving the business problem first, and then using technology to support the 'why'. Digital marketers often rely on 'the algorithm' to make decisions using data, and privacy is a tick-box exercise at the end. The data suggests that there is some truth in this: that there is a level of awareness, but the data is not strong enough to suggest that digital marketers are including privacy in their strategies upfront. Literature on the topic is just as limited. While guidelines exist on

how tech giants are phasing out cookies, more robust views of the actual strategies incorporating privacy are few and far between.

### *5.2.3 Change and readiness levels*

As the most discussed theme in proposition one, change was identified as a determining factor in cookie deprecation. Participants spoke to change as a constant and have displayed varying views regarding their believes towards change, most positive, but with an undertone of anxious anticipation. Awareness-building is not just a case of effective communications (Hiatt, 2006). There are multiple factors which influence how readily people recognise the need to change. These factors are displayed throughout the interviews and are mapped in table four.

**Table 4 Factors influencing awareness to change and interview feedback**

| Factors influencing awareness to change | Interview feedback |
|---|---|
| **Factor 1: Views of the current state** | Change is good and could make lives easier.<br>Focus should be on building on the basics.<br>Reluctance to go on new journeys.<br>Constant upskilling is needed to be abreast of change.<br>Wealth of data is needed to provide insights.<br>Being open minded to change is crucial. |
| **Factor 2: Cognitive perception of problems** | Positive, yet weary.<br>Perceives the change personally.<br>Tough adaptation to change. |
| **Factor 3: The credibility of the sender** | Google's delay in effecting the change impacts credibility.<br>Education on change is often overlooked – change management is crucial.<br>Benefits need to be clearly communicated. |
| **Factor 4: Misinformation and rumours** | Perception that marketers know everything.<br>Change involves specificities such as generative AI and robots which some believe could take jobs. |
| **Factor 5: Disputing the reasons for** | Obligatory compliance to change. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **change.** | Core principles have remained the same, sometimes innovation doesn't mean brand new, but rather doing something differently. |

**Factor 1: Views of the current state.**

As Hiatt, p. (2006, p. 11) explained, "the more comfortable and invested people are in the current state, the more likely they are to ignore or discredit the reasons for change. The more discontent they are with the current state, the more likely they will listen to and internalise the reasons for change". In the context of change, some are eager and want to embrace change, indicating that there could potentially be a measure of dissatisfaction with some digital marketers in the current form. Some of the challenges as presented by Kapoor (2022) indicate that marketers need to be constantly developing to meet the needs of the customer: customers are tech savvy, socially empowered, information-rich and have little time. If a digital marketer is not abreast of these evolving customer needs and approaching them with strategies that are fit for purpose, dissatisfaction is unavoidable.

Digital marketers are equally tasked with driving relevant traffic to websites, targeting the right audiences, generating leads using social media or changing trends (Anbumani, 2017). There have been drastic shifts in buying patterns and pressure from business to sell via digital channels, but without the right methods and guidance, digital marketers are likely to display discontentment, which creates the need for change.

A reason to discredit the change could mean that digital marketers are comfortable with their current situation. When people are in positions for a long period of time, or have ample professional experience, oftentimes change is a threat or even viewed as an unnecessary alteration or modification. The sentiment is that if it is not broken, then why fix it.

**Factor 2: Cognitively perceiving problems.**

Hiatt (2006) speaks about two cognitive styles on a spectrum of more adaptive to more innovative. Employees whose style is more adaptive are more aware of internal threats, and employees whose style is more innovative are more aware of external drivers for change. Each participant presented a unique

understanding of change: one acknowledged that cookie deprecation will be tough whilst others believed that it is up to the individual to take on change. Adaptive individuals are willing to learn, read up on cookie deprecation and upskill – one can assume that these individuals are aware of internal threats because of the knowledge they possess. Where the spectrum slants to innovation, an alert to trends and the basics of marketing whilst driving proof of concept is key, these individuals are inclined to awareness of external drivers of change. These cognitive styles lean closely on the fact that people, rather than processes, are at the centre of any change management tool or concept (Kliewe et al., 2013).

**Factor 3: Credibility of the sender**

This factor speaks to awareness messages being received from the sender and the credibility of these messages. In this study, messages from tech giants Google or Apple can be further extended to organisations where digital marketers belong. The idea is to understand how individuals internalise information. Receiving the messages from a trusted sender aids in the digital marketer's perception of credibility. According to Kelton and colleagues (2008), trust is a key variable between information quality and information usage. With cookie deprecation being introduced, awareness and education plays an important role, but trust is the inter-linking variable that can deliver success in a quicker time frame.

One participant discussed how Google has drawn out cookie deprecation over a few years, and that one cannot solely blame marketers for not knowing how to treat the change. This wears the reason for credibility quite thin. However, because of the tech giant's gravitas, there is still a certain level of trust and reliance on Google. Education about the alternatives, or how one should approach a first-party data strategy, exists in very niche areas of the internet. Organisations also need to put change management practices in place to educate and make people aware of the impeding change. This was identified as a scarce capability in digital marketing departments. If the benefits are clearly communicated, the perceptions of the messenger's credibility can positively influence a person's willingness to acknowledge the change.

**Factor 4: Circulation of misinformation or rumours**

A few pointers from participants explained how they are worried that technology, such as generative AI, natural language processing and robots, could take over their jobs. While this might not directly or only arise from cookie deprecation, the uncertainty and misinformation creates a level of disbelief for digital marketers. Google has withheld their efforts to present alternatives to cookies for a long time, resulting in people formulating their own perceptions of the change and, in turn, spreading unverified information and opinions to those who are yet to learn of the change. This clouds already-confused views and sustains anxiety around the specific changes in the industry.

**Factor 5: Contestability of the reasons for change**

The reason for change is clear - tech giants need to comply to privacy laws, and to protect their customer. There are regulation-borne risks to non-compliance from the tech company and from an organisational level. The reasons for change are external to a digital marketer and are observable. Hiatt (2006) implies that if there is an issue of contestability, it can create a barrier to change, and if the reasons for change are debatable, then the time required to build awareness will be longer. In some cases, the digital marketer may not accept the reasons for change. Most of the participants said that they are aware that change is coming, and they do not have a choice but to comply. Nearly all of them regarded this as an advantageous change, which could indicate that there isn’t an overt contestability to change.

Awareness-building establishes the groundwork from which digital marketers can make choices about change. The above five factors indicate the intricacies of change. Royle and Laing (2014) looked at the skills gaps of digital marketers and, interestingly, the lack of futureproofing for technological change was identified as a skills gap. With any new technology there is a natural resistance to change. Digital marketers are slowly embracing change, even though there is some resistance as identified in the above five factors which influence how readily people recognise the need to change.

## 5.3 Discussion pertaining to Proposition 2

### *5.3.1 Digital Marketing Strategy*

Digital marketers regard strategy an essential component to get right when it comes to cookie deprecation. With the change approaching, many are unsure of how to approach strategic elements within their ambit. However, marketers are aware that the need for first-party data will potentially impact strategy. A few suggestions about strategy were put forward. A digital marketing analyst said that it depends on where one is in the marketing funnel, which indicates how one needs to communicate. When it comes to the bottom of the funnel, which speaks to leads, first-party data will need to be considered in the context of cookie deprecation.

Clear objectives need to be set to be able to understand how to reach a customer, how to communicate, and potentially engage and convert them. Saura and colleagues (2017) speak to the importance of identifying key performance indicators (KPI's) in marketing strategy formulation. By comparison, objectives and KPI's are of equal importance. In this study, there were potential concerns expressed by participants about the lack of knowledge of what metrics should be used to justify marketing investments. Saura and colleagues (2017) further indicated that there is a skills gap when it comes to monitoring and assessing marketing actions. This gap could potentially weaken a digital marketer's strategy as a full understanding of their efforts will be incomplete. This, in turn, impacts how digital marketers calculate the return on investment to the business. If digital marketers are not fully skilled in measurement and insights, the use of first-party data and how to weave it into strategic work will become a challenge. A participant noted that targeted communication is another technique that can be refined. According to Wind and Mahajan (2002) 'nurturing ecosystems' is an appropriate metaphor to marketing rather than 'targeting a customer', and this holds true today given the changes that organisations will need to adopt when it comes to cookie deprecation.

Relevant content strategies that feed into a solid digital marketing strategy are important, as according to Baltes (2015), digital marketers need to understand their target in order to adapt their content and to choose the right way in which to promote it. This holds true when digital marketers will no longer be able to use cookies to

understand behaviours. Business-to-business (B2B) marketers may be closer to understanding this concept, as one-to-one marketing and understanding the customer is foundational to this type of marketing strategy. Approaching a marketing strategy in a focused and targeted way will reduce wastage, a participant spoke to the fact that marketers spend a lot of money on marketing the wrong things to customers creating a spray and pray approach. Tying into the point about strategies focused on awareness campaigns and marketing to the mass market. Often times, broad reach is achieved, but not having a tailored approach creates wastage, because marketers are not applying audience insights and knowledge.

If cookies continue to be used as a means of collecting behavioural data from the customer, then it will typically be in re-marketing strategies. Re-targeting is a powerful way to drive conversion and performance in a marketing campaign (Prasad et al., 2021). According to Israfilzade and Guliyeva (2023), re-marketing campaigns can be executed through various strategies through conversion, optimisation, personalised offers among other sales strategies. Re-targeting predominantly uses third-party cookies as a function to serve targeted adverts to a user. When probed on what the alternative to re-marketing is, participants spoke about first-party CRM data that will need to be used in place of re-marketing strategies, accessing logged-in environments of websites, and plugging into the correct platforms. The literature suggests that re-marketing usually drives conversions, and no longer being able to rely on cookies to enable this technique will be challenging. Digital marketers will also need to understand how to use first-party data to drive conversion, optimisation, personalised offers, and additional sales. These approaches did not surface in the interviews. In fact, a respondent said, “we are going to be forced to think outside of the box, and we’ve got to be smarter about how and what we do”. There was no further detail provided about how this could be done.

Participants did speak to precision marketing, which was not discussed in the literature. They also spoke to the fact that attribution should be the life blood of digital marketing strategies. Zhu and Gao (2019) suggested that marketing strategies will turn towards personalisation, where customer segmentation endeavours to analyse consumption behaviours. ‘sZoratti and Gallagher (2012) work explains how marketers should commit themselves to customer-focused strategies grounded in

rigorous customer insight achieved though data mining, analysis and enriched profiling using third-party data sources. The concept about this type of precision marketing may have rung true to marketers, but over ten years later, third-party data will play a limited role in enriched customer profiling, if at all. Customer profiling will mean understanding the customer, and potentially building look-a-like audiences of the ideal customer.

Developing strategy in light of cookie deprecation can be surmised as a re-active exercise rather than marketers being proactive and developing potential strategies and ideation in preparation for Google's cookie phase out.

### *5.3.2 First-party Data*

First-party data was the most common theme in the interviews. Oksanen (2022) developed a model that companies can use to assess the maturity of cookie deprecation in their organisations. The model uses three dimensions, the first being first-party data which included a few sub-dimensions such as consent collection, a 360 degree view of the customer and data orchestration, data enrichment with CRM data, segmentation, capturing data with first-party identifiers and lastly, customer benefits to share data. The sub-dimensions were aggregated from low to high to show the maturity of an organization when it comes to cookie deprecation, with a closer view of first-party data. The results of the study indicated that companies scored the highest when it came to first-party data, suggesting an insufficient concern with having enough first-party data. However, not all companies have a comprehensive CRM set up.

One can draw compelling similarities between the literature and the data collected in this study. In most cases, the indication is that there is no shortage of first-party data. A digital marketer confirmed that while they have millions of active subscribers, they are not sure about how to utilise this data for advertising purposes. In larger, older, more traditional organisations (such as a few of the organisations to which the participants belong), data exists in vast nodes. This concretises challenges such as having too much data, having data that is not clean, or data that is unusable because of no consent. CRM data also exists in various silos, giving companies fragmented views of the customer. A data orchestration strategy is needed with

teams who understand how to pull data together. Digital marketers should also take a keen interest in why data is being gathered and what it will be used for.

The general consensus was that a Customer Data Platform (CDP) is needed and could kick-start and maintain data for digital marketers. Governance of data is crucial, even more specifically within new marketing techniques using a CDP (or not). Inasmuch as each participant acknowledged that data governance is key and that there are teams within the organisation who address governance, a proposition would be that marketing departments need to onboard data governance capabilities to focus on data standards, data sources coordination, data management, quality and data security (Schmuck, 2022).

Regarding cookies and alternate methods of user tracking, participants were positive about the changes brought on by cookie deprecation, stating that the change forces marketers to consider the exact value that they bring to the business, but the challenge is to get to a point that is ready for the change. The participants included digital marketers, digital media specialists and digital analysts. Interestingly, digital marketers did not have much insight into the world of cookies, or alternatives to using cookies, tying into proposition one, which refers to testing digital marketers' awareness when it came to cookie deprecation. Awareness exists, but the impact on digital marketing strategies was not a point of discussion.

### *5.3.3 Personalisation within Digital Marketing Strategies*

Participants presented an ardent approach to personalisation and they held a fair understanding of how it works. Getting to know a customer and building their knowledge base about who the customer is, with an effort to tailor messages to them, was key. Relationship-building and engagement is a component of personalisation which was reflected by participants and by research (Schubert & Ginsburg, 2000). Collecting the right data will ensure messages can be tailored to the right audiences. The reality of having different views of a customer can create commotion in an organisation which distorts a marketer's vision for personalising messages to customers.

According to Siraj (2021), personalisation and privacy concerns are inextricable. This means that customers enjoy personalised marketing services but are concerned about how much a company knows about them. What is interesting is that customers may only show their concern when they are reminded about privacy (Lee & Cranage, 2011). In contrast, a participant stated that research revealed that the customer does not mind an organisation collecting their data, as long as the company uses it legitimately. So, trust must be present, and ethical data practices are key for transparency between the customer and an organisation. With first-party data becoming the go-to for marketing strategies in light of cookie deprecation, the argument persists. The infancy of practice is a concern and the gap between legislation, marketing and the customer becomes evident. Will a marketer treat the use of first-party data with the utmost care, or will it be used like third-party data, where generic messages are sent, and data continues to live in silos across the organisation?

“People have the right to be forgotten,” a digital marketer stated. This decision lies with the customer and agrees with Hemker and colleagues’ (2021) citation that privacy is the “desire to choose freely under what circumstances and to what extent they will expose themselves, their attitude and behaviour to others.” How marketers store data and use data becomes a central focus of a digital marketing strategy. However, few people spoke to these points, which raises cause for concern.

Digital marketing strategies using personalisation presents themselves in various forms going forward. Companies are partnering to obtain more data to enrich first-party data (second-party data), and are collecting zero-party data, which is defined as the data a customer intentionally and proactively shares with an organisation for improved personalisation (Polonioli, 2022). This approach is limited due to the fact that organisations do not have the right to obtain any and all of a customer’s data. Levels of intrusiveness also need to be considered, specifically in line with the POPI Act. Close look-a-like audiences are created using technology and tools are presented from media agencies and technology within martech stacks in larger organisations. Segmentation techniques will still exist within strategies, but through a lens of understanding the customer segment of one. Mass marketing in the upper level of the marketing funnel will need to be reconsidered, as one-to-one

marketing becomes more popular in marketing strategies. Personalisation using data and analytics is crucial and a marketing strategy that does not encompass these practices will be found wanting.

Personalisation dates back to face-to-face relationship-building, where a person within a company built a relationship with a customer (Shen & Ball, 2009). This statement still holds true, even with new privacy laws, and protection of personal information. The focus need not shift, data enhances personalisation and is advantageous to a marketer. The anxiety around the topic is expected as it is a new practice. With this being said, a lot more work must be done to understand data, to appreciate the data already in existence, and to respect said data. It is imperative for organisations to support marketers as they embark on personalisation in and amongst privacy journeys. Even though it is a paradox, both personalisation and privacy can co-exist and be beneficial to an organisation.

## 5.4 Conclusion

The findings showed various views and insights pertaining to the two propositions. The first proposition aimed to understand a digital marketers' awareness levels of cookie deprecation and the changing landscape that technology giants are imposing, which has implications on how digital marketing strategy is practiced. Buchholz (2022) explained that cookie deprecation is a blow to marketers but did not mention if digital marketers are aware of it or not. An alternative angle presented by Oksanen (2022), explained that cookie deprecation is a reality and organisations are aware of privacy protection through regulation, however not all are aware that digital marketing strategies will need to change to comply with regulation.

In response to the first proposition, digital marketers are fairly aware of third-party cookie deprecation. Their understanding of it, however, is moderate to low. Not all digital marketers know how to differentiate between the various types of cookies, nor what to do in response to the Google cookie phase out. There is the perception that larger organisations have, in part, solved for the change, but participants indicated that not all organisations are geared for the change. Maturity levels of a digital marketer were elaborated on – a lack of knowledge and forward-thinking skills could be a contributor to low levels of awareness and understanding.

Privacy and the protection of personal information have not been fully embraced and organisations' privacy departments are in their infancy. Change in general was a common theme among participants. The five factors that influence awareness were present throughout the interview data, indicating the need for groundwork where marketers can make choices about change and its intricacies.

Proposition two aimed to unpack how digital marketers are in fact approaching their strategies in anticipation of the Google cookie phase out, and if there were any associated opportunities. Many were unsure of how to approach strategic elements but were clearly aware that strategy will in fact need to evolve. Key performance indicators, as outlined by Saura and colleagues (2017), are crucial when developing marketing strategies. KPI's will become increasingly important as alternate methods of user tracking are developed, and personalisation techniques become evident. Participants discussed marketing funnels and how to bring about first-party data into strategies that used the funnel approach. This was identified as an opportunity, along with establishing the right target audience and tailoring communication within the market-of-one concept. Wind and Mahajan's (2002) analogy of nurturing ecosystems was displayed in the interviews. Content strategies will also need to change, through clearly understanding objectives and audiences. Re-marketing will be severely impacted, but with first-party data the propensity to convert in initial stages could be higher, and alternate methods of re-marketing will need to be employed. Few participants were knowledgeable about these methods.

The conversation surrounding first-party data was crucial when exploring proposition two, in fact it was the most prevalent theme. Discussions about having enough first-party data, but not hosting a comprehensive CRM setup, was evident. A Customer Data Platform is needed to collect, store, and utilise data, where compliance to the POPI Act occurs. Another topic relating to strategy was personalisation in the context of privacy. Many participants demonstrated a good knowledge of personalisation. The literature speaks to the inter-linked nature of personalisation and privacy, and how trust plays a role when customers make purchasing decisions or submitting their details to an organisation. Customers have the right to be forgotten and the customer is at the forefront of privacy, personalisation, and digital marketing strategies overall.

# Chapter 6: Conclusions And Recommendations

## 6.1 Introduction

This conclusion chapter presents an integration of findings pertaining to the two propositions, with a view from the research questions. Prospective answers to each research question are provided. The chapter includes recommendations and suggestions for further research.

## 6.2 Conclusions regarding research question 1

The usage of cookies in digital marketing strategies has grown over the years, to a point that there is an over-reliance on cookies to deliver business value. With the advent of the cookie phase-out from tech giants like Google, Meta, and Apple, digital marketers will need to adapt to the change that the phase out brings. The purpose of this study was to understand whether digital marketers are aware of the impact of cookie deprecation on their marketing strategies. Firstly, digital marketers were found to be definitely aware that cookie deprecation is coming, however not many digital marketers were aware of what the impact will be on their strategies, nor how to approach the change. Literature alludes to cookie deprecation being a blow to marketers (Buchholz, 2022), but limited research speaks to the awareness levels of digital marketers, or how they will need to approach the change.

Digital marketers displayed a moderate to low understanding of how to navigate privacy within the context of POPIA. As clarified in the conceptual framework, digital marketers are at the centre with two influences acting upon them - the POPIA regulation and cookie deprecation. The POPIA sought to enact regulation and provide a sense of data control, but not many organisations are onboard. Cookie deprecation enforces a timeline on digital marketers to find alternative methods to track a user. Both influences necessitate the embrace of change. Change was the most discussed theme within proposition one. There was an undertone of anxiety from participants about the change. Most saw the advantage of cookie deprecation, but a lot of challenges were highlighted. Some mentioned things will be a lot harder because of the measurement piece, media agencies lose power, collecting consent and making sure it is understood by the organisation, a general lack of

understanding of how to proceed. The literature suggests that there could be skills gaps present, and a lack of futureproofing for technological change will be a challenge.

Significant similarities were drawn with Oksanen's (2022) study about maturity levels of organisations, indicating that if maturity is low, awareness levels are low. The finding in this study showed that participants spoke about digital marketers' maturity levels contributing to them not being able understand the change. There was also confusion about cookie deprecation, the different types of cookies, and the different roles they play. Interestingly, from studies conducted in the US, UK and Sub-Saharan Africa, similar challenges were experienced, that is, awareness levels are low, but digital marketers are not sure how to proceed with cookie deprecation, nor even the benefits that pertain to cookie consent or first-party data.

A stark observation is that there is a gap between legislation and marketing practice, even within different jurisdictions, specifically and including in South Africa. Drilling down to the size or type of organisation, there were some who embraced privacy and others who are yet to begin. There is a reliance on technology to solve potential problems and participants mentioned that one should solve for the 'why' instead of the 'what' with reference to the business problem. A safe assumption to make for proposition one is that if Digital Marketers are not fully aware of the change, marketing practices will be negatively impacted, and so too will the organisation's bottom line.

## 6.3 Conclusions regarding research question 2

Research question two asked how digital marketers will approach personalisation, considering the effects of cookie deprecation. In response to this question, few views were put forward. As a precursor, many were unsure of how to approach cookie deprecation, nor how to start thinking about personalisation in the privacy context. A select few spoke about the potential for first-party data to offer personalised communication - this was the most prevalent theme. First-party data is an ideal way of building a digital marketing strategy, but many do not know where to begin: to collect first-party CRM data, or to harness the first-party data that exists within the organisation.

First-party data within large traditional organisations is usually found in fragmented silos, and a unified view of the customer is a long shot. Marketers often occupy unfortunate positions, where data does not belong to them, and obtaining data is a challenge. Customer Data Platforms (CDP's) are seen as a potential solution for collection and storage of data, additionally, using this data to feed into advertising platforms. Having said this, and as mentioned in the findings under proposition one, digital marketers are now solving for the technology by onboarding new CDP technology while forgetting to solve for business challenges. The opportunity lies in establishing the right target audience, even if it means classifying first-party data and creating look-a-like audiences to exploit potential acquisition techniques and strategies.

Another way digital marketers will approach personalisation amidst cookie deprecation is through distinct content strategies. It was identified that current approaches will need to change so that objectives and audiences are taken into consideration. Re-marketing will be impacted, and as expected, the reliance is on Google to provide alternative methods to cookie tracking. There is also heavy reliance on CRM data, but however Digital Marketers will clearly have to upskill to understand how to connect the right data to their campaigns. The golden link will be data that will drive the conversion, optimisation and personalisation practice towards a winning marketing strategy. Unfortunately, none of these methods were mentioned or discussed in the interviews.

Participants elaborated on precision marketing, which while not fully covered in the literature nor is it a new concept. This marketing technique will allow for creative thinking when it comes to cookie deprecation and the use of first-party data. Using customer segmentation to analyse consumption behaviour will assist in a cookie-less marketing strategy. The literature and participant feedback agree that the customer should always and in all ways be at the centre of any marketing strategy. Rigorous customer insight is required. Having CRM data from broader areas of business is one way of approaching a marketing strategy. However, in order to excel in the field, in-depth insights will get a marketer closer to an ideal state. Developing a digital marketing strategy in light of cookie deprecation will be reactive at first, until first-party customer data is understood and applied in the correct context.

## 6.4 Limitations and Challenges of the study

The study was concerned with people's experiences and the current events that influenced their perspectives/understanding. There was an expectation that the participants would at the very least know sufficient amounts of detail about cookie deprecation to be able to answer some of the questions. A possible limitation was volunteer bias, or self-selection bias, where research volunteers avail themselves to research (Hills et al., 2013). If the volunteers were not keen on sharing their understanding of the topic, the study would have lacked technical detail and rich impartations. A sample of people who were completely unaware of cookie deprecation would have shown greater gaps in the industry.

Personal bias was also a limitation: people's biases about new concepts, such as cookie deprecation, can colour their perspectives. People may have an affinity to certain technology providers or have personal dislikes about the invasiveness of personalisation, as an example.

Challenges in the study came through some of the responses of alternative methods to cookie tracking, as almost all participants did not have a solution. Participants also experienced challenges particularly when it came to the approach to change and coping mechanisms.

## 6.5 Implications and practical recommendations for Digital Marketers

Based on the findings of this study, digital marketers are on the frontline of cookie deprecation and as such, a keen understanding of what these changes entail, and implications will be indispensable to their success.

Implications to a digital marketer include the adaptation of the marketing strategy to rely less on third-party data, which is a fundamental change as not all organisations are geared up to collecting customer data first hand, therefore collection of data, cleaning data that already exists and analysing the data to ensure it is in a usable format is an important step to getting marketing strategies future proofed. From a user's perspective, privacy is carefully considered whereby

extensive user profiles based on browser history is limited, having said that personalised experiences will be equally limited and the shift in how digital marketers are tailoring content might negatively impact the user experience, engagement and ultimately satisfaction.

From an ad-tech perspective, sizeable implications exist. Advertisers will need to unpack alternative methods of targeting users and measuring campaigns, tension could persist between the advertiser and the digital marketer to deliver to business needs.

Managers will also need to collaborate with partners a lot more effectively and forge new relationships that will aid in privacy solutions. Managers will need to also develop frameworks and infrastructures that address the reliance on third-party cookies, enhance data collection methods through owned channels and CRM systems. Motivating for and allocating sufficient resources, capacity and building capability for new requirements.

Managers have a big role to play, and while they do, the spotlight on the important of policy is becoming brighter. Policy around transparency of data collection, identifying data owners, sources, storage etc. exists in organisations. The implication is that a digital marketer must ensure regulatory compliance and adapt accordingly. Policy cannot be an afterthought or a reactive stance, it needs to be built into everything that a digital marketer does.

Implications to a digital marketer may sound bleak, however the positive outlook is that with this change, comes the great opportunity for innovation. Innovation from an ad-tech perspective, as well as from a digital marketer. New solutions can be investigated with the tech giants, but in addition new tracking solutions, data privacy solutions and more. A digital marketer is at the realm of the change and the opportunities could be endless.

The first recommendation to a digital marketer when it comes to equipping and upskilling with knowledge is to constantly read up on the evolving process that Google is introducing. Continuous professional development is a requirement for many professions across sectors, with many seeking to update their qualifications

and increase professional knowledge (J. Ryan, 2003). Marketers can at the very least, keep up with news on the topic - every few months, new developments are shared in respective Sandbox environments.

There are skills gaps within the current scope. When it comes to future proofing, learning, development initiatives, and digitisation skills will be the differentiator for those that move at the forefront, placing them ahead of those who are reactive and lag.

Change is a catalyst for growth. Digital marketers ought to use the approaching change as a stepping stone to advance their position in the industry. Many participants spoke to the change being inevitable, with awareness being present and accompanied by uncertainties about how to adapt. Analysing the current scope and formulating methods of adaptation will be beneficial to digital marketers. The outcome will result in being more equipped to deal with change, and in turn, consolidating the change more effectively. In some interviews there was an underlying anxiety: change management solutions will provide digital marketers the room to express their concerns and to work through possible solutions.

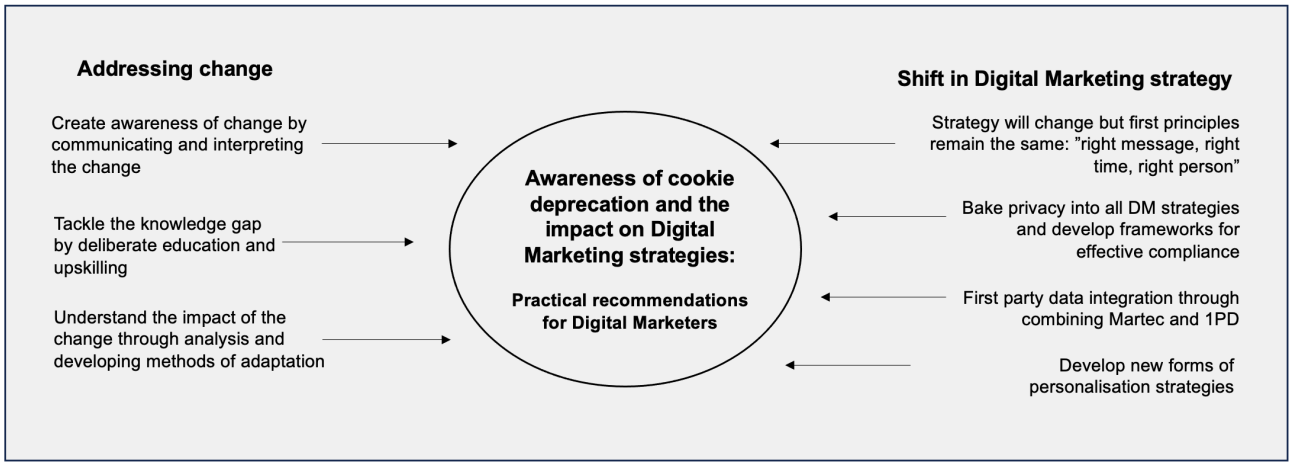
It is equally important to understand that there will be shifts in digital marketing strategy. Deeper awareness of cookie deprecation can produce positive shifts in Digital Marketing strategies (Figure 13). First-party data plays a crucial role in personalisation efforts and digital marketing strategies will need to incorporate new techniques to productively use first-party data. Digital marketers should not feel comfortable with traditional methods of personalisation and their reliance on cookies. Having said that, first principles do not change. It is still important to nurture eco-systems and build beneficial relationships with customers, bringing the ‘right message at the right time to the right person.’ Layering first-party data can only enrich personalisation efforts. Marketers also have a mammoth task ahead when it comes to understanding who owns the data in the organisation, how it can live within a central repository like a CDP, and how the data is managed from a marketing point of view and in conjunction with the business.

Marketers have the added challenge of learning about the various tools being presented to them from tech giants. Here are two examples from Google’s

measurement portfolio in recent times that emphasise privacy: Consent mode and enhanced conversions. Consent mode communicates a user's consent choices through Google tags, and the website adjusts its behaviour according to the user's choice (accept or reject cookies). Consent Mode can measure conversions without using or accessing user data (Foucault, 2024). Another tool includes enhanced conversions for web, which enables more accurate conversion measures. Existing data of tracked conversions is supplemented by pulling the conversion data (first-party information like name, email) before Google receives it, where it is matched against Google accounts that are signed in. If there is a match, it is recorded as a conversion for the site's analytics (Tiktin, 2024). These tools will become important when formulating marketing strategies in a cookie-less future.

It is recommended that privacy should be baked into all digital marketing strategies, whether it be from a media point of view in the third-party banner landscape, to drive various metrics within the marketing funnel, or on websites, where cookie consent tools are plugged in. Each element in a customer's user journey should consider the protection of personal information of the data subject.

**Figure 11 Practical recommendations for Digital Marketers**




## 6.6 Suggestions for further research

A consideration for further research could be delving into a deeper understanding of legislation within marketing. This study clearly evidenced the need for knowledge of privacy and cookie deprecation. Understandably, imposing regulation is one angle of looking at this dilemma, but incorporating privacy into

marketing strategies, and how to tangibly carry it out successfully, is yet to be understood.

There is limited research on cookie deprecation itself and this could be due to the change not being finalised from tech giants. However, when said changes occur, concerted research into alternatives to cookie tracking will be needed. Digital marketers will need the support in terms of how to implement new solutions while still answering to the needs of the business and customer. Furthermore, this research did not cover actual digital marketing strategies in light of cookie deprecation. As such, further research that will break down strategic elements will be necessary.

Research pertaining to cookie deprecation on industry, company and location will provide better insights into the topic. This study focused on people from the digital marketing industry across varied fields and differently sized organisations. Insights pertaining to specific sectors and organisations will benefit the digital marketer, as the analysis will provide real-life examples on how to create relatable and specific strategies in the context of cookie deprecation. Research in this area will also assist industry leaders to understand the maturity of digital marketers when it comes to change, future-ready skills, adaptation of technological changes, and how to approach the challenges that may present in future.

In this study, precision marketing was widely discussed, including how this marketing technique can assist in demand generation campaigns, including conversion and optimisation themes becomes crucial. Not enough of research addresses this topic, considering privacy and personalisation.

Digital marketers are aware of cookie deprecation, but they do not fully know how to approach it in, specifically in the formulation of their strategies and including personalisation. Awareness levels, although low, do exist, but there was a very limited view of the solutions. Further research needs to expand on this view and can contribute positively to the bodies of knowledge in academia and digital marketing alike.

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# APPENDIX A: Interview Guide

## Table 5 Interview guide

| Theme in alignment to research question | Question | Probing questions |
|---|---|---|
| Opening | 1. Can you tell me a little bit about your role at company *x*? | |
| Awareness | 2. Given your experience with *x*, can you give me a little more detail around your understanding of cookie deprecation, which is commonly understood as the phasing out of cookie tracking? | 2.a. How will the phasing out of cookies from major tech giants such as Google and Facebook impact the digital advertising world?<br><br>2.b. What are some of the implications of this on digital marketing strategies? |
| Awareness | 3. How much knowledge do you think marketers have about the changes in the industry at the moment? | 3.a. Can you perhaps give me some insight as to why you say so? |
| Awareness | 4. In your opinion, what are organisations doing to address privacy of personal information within the marketing context? | |
| Marketing strategies | 5. What does personalisation in the digital media world mean to you? | |
| Marketing strategies | 6. How can a digital marketer put forward a marketing strategy while bearing in mind privacy concerns of current and potential customers? | 6.a. Re-marketing is heavily reliant on cookies to be able to serve a user with relevant information based on their interactions online. What would a work around be in the place of re-marketing? |
| Marketing strategies | 7. Can you explain if you think cookie deprecation can be used to the advantage of a digital marketer? | 7.a. In the context of the marketing funnel, which is awareness, consideration, engagement, and |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | action, do you think cookie deprecation will impact the funnel, and how? |
| Awareness | 8. Given that Google is the dominant browser and are still to roll out on cookie deprecation, what in your view could digital marketers expect from the tech giant as alternative methods for user tracking? | 8.a. What does your overall digital marketing strategy look like? |
| Closing | 9. Technology is constantly changing and evolving in digital marketing, can you give me 3 ways in which digital marketers can adapt to change? | |

# APPENDIX B: Ethics Certificate

**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/DB2495297/508
*This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Project title** | Awareness of cookie deprecation and implications for digital marketing strategies in South Africa |
| **Investigator / Researcher** | Mrs Celeste Pillay |
| **Nature of Project** | MM (Digital Business) |
| **Decision of the Committee** | Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed confidentialty. |
| **Issue Date of Certificate** | 2022-12-06 |
| **Expiry date** | Date of submission of the project / research report |
| **Chairperson** | Prof Anthony Stacey<br>☎ +27 11 717 3587<br>+27 82 880 4531<br>✉ 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.

Pillay
Signature

15 December 2022
Date:

## APPENDIX C: Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

I am completing my Masters in management in the field of Digital Business at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr Emmanuel Quaye. I am conducting a research study about privacy in marketing and cookie deprecation. The study is titled: **Awareness of cookie deprecation and implications for digital marketing strategies in South Africa**

I am inviting you to take part in an interview that explores awareness of cookie deprecation as well as strategies in response to the changes in the industry. Your experience as well as expertise and knowledge in the field will highly benefit this study and I will be appreciative of your participation. The interview will last about 30 minutes and will take place on Microsoft Teams.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored on a secure file for 1 year and deleted after 2 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you, including your name, surname, job title and your views on the subject.

The interview will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You can stop participating at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are

welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Celeste Pillay

2495297@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor:

Dr. Emmanuel Quaye

emmanuel.quaye@wits.ac.za

## APPENDIX D: Participant Agreement/Consent Form

**Research Title:** Awareness of cookie deprecation and implications for digital marketing strategies in South Africa

Researcher: Celeste Pillay

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

| | |
|---|---|
| The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about. | YES NO |
| **I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study** | YES NO |
| I agree that the interview may be audio recorded | YES NO |
| I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report | YES NO |
| I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report) | YES NO |
| I agree that **other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview/focus group/other activity (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on** | YES NO |

…… (signature)

…… (name of participant)

…… (date)

…… (signature)

…… (name of researcher)

…… (date)