

The role of managers in driving effective paid media strategies in an advertising agency

O papel dos gestores na condução de estratégias eficazes de mídia paga numa agência de publicidade

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper develops a practical model for the critical activities of the paid media manager in driving the successful implementation of digital paid advertising campaigns.

Originality/value: Based on previous articles about the revolution in the advertising sector through digital and social media (Araújo et al., 2020; Helberger et al., 2020; Liu-Thompkins, 2019), the study responds to latent calls for further research on the roles and skills required by advertising professionals in the face of the digital transformation of advertising practices. In addition, we also related these professionals' skills to the campaigns' perceived success.

Design/methodology/approach: We undertook a qualitative multi-case study, conducting semi-structured interviews involving paid media firms investing in digital advertising. The interviews were analyzed using the Gioia Methodology to ensure qualitative rigor in performing inductive research.

Findings: We found that paid media managers must challenge client briefings, collaborate with creative teams, and dynamically adjust campaign elements for optimization. The key skills must include technical proficiency, information management, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Successful implementation leads to efficient targeting, real-time content adaptation, and cost-effectiveness. The study offers a roadmap for advertising agencies to effectively implement digital ad campaigns, namely from the recruiting and continuous upskilling of Paid Media Managers by identifying their critical roles to the businesses' assistance in allocating advertising budgets more effectively by providing a thorough understanding of the benefits inherent in digital advertising investments.

Keywords: advertising agency, paid media manager, digital advertising, paid media, skills

Resumo

Propósito: Este artigo desenvolve um modelo prático sobre as atividades críticas do Gestor de Mídia Paga na condução da implementação bem-sucedida de campanhas publicitárias pagas digitais.

Originalidade/valor: Com base em artigos anteriores sobre a revolução no setor publicitário através da mídia digital e social (Araújo et al., 2020; Helberger et al., 2020; Liu-Thompkins, 2019), o estudo responde a apelos latentes por mais pesquisas sobre os papéis e habilidades exigidos dos profissionais de publicidade diante da transformação digital das práticas publicitárias. Além disso, também relacionamos essas habilidades dos profissionais com o sucesso percebido das campanhas.

Design/metodologia/abordagem: Realizamos um estudo de múltiplos casos qualitativos, conduzindo entrevistas semiestruturadas com empresas de mídia paga que estão investindo em publicidade digital. A análise das entrevistas foi feita com a Metodologia Gioia para garantir rigor qualitativo tanto na condução quanto na apresentação da pesquisa indutiva.

Resultados: Descobrimos que os gestores de mídia paga devem desafiar os briefings dos clientes, colaborar com as equipes criativas e ajustar dinamicamente os elementos das campanhas para otimização. As habilidades essenciais incluem proficiência técnica, gestão da informação, pensamento crítico, criatividade, colaboração e comunicação. A implementação bem-sucedida leva a um direcionamento eficiente, adaptação de conteúdo em tempo real e rentabilidade. Na prática, o estudo oferece um roteiro para as agências de publicidade implementarem eficazmente campanhas publicitárias digitais, desde o recrutamento e aprimoramento contínuo dos Gestores de Mídia Paga, identificando seus papéis críticos, até a assistência às empresas na alocação mais eficaz dos orçamentos publicitários, proporcionando uma visão completa dos benefícios inerentes aos investimentos em publicidade digital.

Palavras-chave: agência de publicidade, gestor de tráfego pago, publicidade digital, meios pagos, *skills*

INTRODUCTION

Critical advances in technology have led to the emergence of new online media channels. These new online media channels revolutionized advertising by offering customers access to relevant messaging and personalized communication. Consequently, they have significantly influenced customer expectations, with a growing demand for brands to deliver communication customized to their specific preferences and needs (Kumar & Gupta, 2016).

To reach customers spending more time online and address their demands, brands are increasingly shifting their budgets from traditional media to digital advertising (Edelman, 2007; Ma & Du, 2018). Statistics show that digital advertising is experiencing remarkable growth, making it the fastest-growing category. Currently, the fastest-growing category of advertising (Dentsu, 2024; Statista, 2024). This trend will continue into 2025, with digital advertising anticipated to grow further (Dentsu, 2024; Viveiros, 2024). The widespread adoption of digital advertising can be attributed to its advantages over traditional advertising methods. The widespread adoption of digital advertising can be attributed to its advantages over traditional advertising methods. Digital advertising platforms, such as Google and Meta, are equipped with powerful computational tools and algorithms that allow advertisers to target their messages to customers based on their characteristics and online behaviors (Huh & Malthouse, 2020). Additionally, digital advertising offers greater adaptability of content, leveraging data collected about customers' interactions with the advertisements (Yun et al., 2020), and is more cost-effective than traditional advertising (Ma & Du, 2018).

The transition to digital advertising has brought significant changes in media planning and buying processes (Carlin, 2005). Media planning decisions are increasingly informed by substantial amounts of data about users' preferences and behaviors extracted from their digital footprints (Araújo et al., 2020). Moreover, customers' interactions with brand digital touchpoints create data that can be measured and inform optimization, advertising decisions, and future touchpoints (Malthouse & Li, 2017). This data can be accessed in real time, allowing advertisers to continuously improve their advertising performance and remain competitive within the digital ecosystem (Yun et al., 2020). Previous research has addressed topics regarding how new online media challenged traditional advertising-focused marketers and how the digital technology revolution has transformed media planning and buying practices (Araújo et al., 2020; Helberger et al., 2020; Schultz, 2016; Huh & Malthouse, 2020; Edelman, 2007; Carlin, 2005).

Additionally, previous studies in digital advertising have asked for further research on the roles and skills required by advertising professionals in the face of the digital transformation of advertising practices (Liu-Thompkins, 2019). Thus, this investigation aims to understand and describe the responsibilities of the Paid Media Manager in driving the successful implementation of a digital paid advertising campaign. This involves exploring the activities needed to implement the digital advertising campaign successfully and identifying the essential skills that the Paid Media Manager must possess to perform those activities, ultimately enabling brands to account for the benefits of digital advertising fully.

Thus, to answer the question of “what roles does the Paid Media Manager play in the successful implementation of a digital paid media campaign?”, we undertook qualitative research, conducting semi-structured interviews involving paid media managers and brands currently investing in digital advertising. This study provides valuable insights for managers in advertising agencies by developing a practical model of the activities required to implement a digital advertising campaign successfully. Additionally, it offers guidance for advertising agencies in recruiting and continuously upskilling Paid Media Managers by identifying the skills needed for successfully implementing a digital advertising campaign. In the educational domain, this study contributes to guiding educational institutions to design curricula that effectively prepare future professionals for this role. Finally, this study can assist businesses in allocating advertising budgets more effectively by providing a thorough understanding of the benefits inherent in digital advertising investments.

The present study is divided into six sections. Section one presents the phenomenon under study, the research gap, and the purpose of the study. In Section 2, a literature review conducted to gain relevant insight into the topic under examination. Section 3 reviews the methodology carried out for this research. Next, Section 4 analyses the evidence from the data gathered through the semi-structured interviews, and, in Section 5, the information gathered is discussed and compared with previous studies mentioned in the literature review. Finally, Section 6 presents the conclusion of this study, including the main takeaways of this investigation, the limitations of the study, and some guidelines for future research.

THE ROLE OF THE PAID MEDIA MANAGER

Digital paid media, or digital advertising, implies that the brands are investing money into gaining exposure in the online environment (Ma &

Du, 2018). With the emergence of the internet in recent decades, digital advertising is proliferating and taking budgets away from traditional channels (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). This shift can be attributed to the advantages that set digital advertising apart from traditional advertising methods. These include more efficient consumer targeting (Liu-Thompkins, 2019), greater adaptability of content (Yun et al., 2020), and cost-effectiveness (Ma & Du, 2018).

In the dynamic landscape of digital advertising, the role of the Paid Media Manager stands out as crucial in planning and executing digital advertising campaigns. Planning a digital advertising campaign involves a series of strategic decisions (Abratt & Cowan, 1999; Wu et al., 2023; Batra & Keller, 2016) aimed at optimizing the use of various media channels to ensure that the advertising message is delivered to the right audience, at the right time in a cost-effective manner, towards attaining the client's competitive advantage in the market (Araújo et al., 2020).

The planning process starts with the client briefing the agency (Wu et al., 2023). The briefing should provide the Paid Media Manager with guidance for campaign planning and include crucial information such as the advertising objectives, target audience, budget constraints, and the brand's positioning in the market (Abratt & Cowan, 1999; Wu et al., 2023; Batra & Keller, 2016; Huh & Malthouse, 2020). Furthermore, for decisions in media planning, the Paid Media Manager should understand possible factors that may determine the budget allocation through different digital media channels. These factors may include the product/service being advertised (Liu-Thompkins, 2019) and the online behavior and preferences of the brand's target audience (Edelman, 2007; Batra & Keller, 2016). Additionally, another factor that should be taken into consideration is the stage of the purchase funnel where the target audience is intended to be reached, recognizing that different media channels may be more effective across different stages, and the synergetic effect that could be created by using other media channels (Batra & Keller, 2016). Moreover, market factors are also essential during the planning process, as they are outside the Paid Media Manager's control but can influence the campaign's effectiveness (Reynar et al., 2010; Araújo et al., 2020).

Insights about those factors have become more accessible than ever due to digital platforms' ability to capture and record consumers' digital footprints (Huh & Malthouse, 2020). Data availability requires a shift towards a data-driven approach to media planning. Paid Media Managers need to leverage analytical tools and techniques to extract meaningful insights from the data collected and use them to inform their decision-making process

(Malthouse & Li, 2017). Media planning decisions encompass the definition of media objectives, identification of the target audience that ensures a high return on investment (ROI), the selection of the digital media channels for optimal message delivery, allocation of the budget across paid media actions, and the definition of creative assets that should be aligned with both media channels and the target audience (Yun et al., 2020; Abratt & Cowan, 1999; Edelman, 2007). These efforts aim to effectively engage customers and guide them through the purchase path (Batra & Keller, 2016; Carlin, 2005) while ensuring the achievement of desired results in digital advertising campaigns (Batra & Keller, 2016; Edelman, 2007).

To attain the digital advertising campaign's desired results, continuously optimizing campaign performance involves ongoing adjustments throughout the campaign's duration (Yun et al., 2020). Accountability measures must be integrated directly into the media plan to optimize advertising campaign performance, ensuring a clear framework for evaluating success based on predefined key performance indicators (KPIs) (Malthouse & Li, 2017). Moreover, professionals should employ strategic foresight by establishing a baseline of benchmark performance data to inform their decision-making process (Yun et al., 2020; Edelman, 2007). By leveraging digital advertising solutions such as Google and Meta, which provide web analytics suites and tracking technology, Paid Media Managers can understand the customer journey and monitor campaign performance across digital touchpoints (Araújo et al., 2020). Then, by comparing real-time data with forecasted results, advertisers can identify optimization opportunities and conduct thorough testing on different campaign elements (Wu et al., 2023), adjusting the campaign according to consumer responses to the advertisement. This interactive process enhances the effectiveness of the digital advertising campaign (Yun et al., 2020).

In the face of the continuous evolution of media planning and buying activities, the skills for embracing and exploiting these technological advancements are also undergoing a transformative shift (Deighton, 2017). This shift fosters the importance of understanding which skills are required by the Paid Media Manager to successfully implement a digital advertising campaign.

The skills of the paid media manager

The skills required for professional environments in the contemporary economy are considered 21st-century skills. The Partnership for 21st-Century

Skills, a collaborative venture between the government and corporate entities, categorizes the required skills into learning, literacy, and life skills (Fadel, 2008). However, it was noted that 21st-century skills do not explicitly integrate digital aspects (van Laar et al., 2017). As digital technology is the primary force for the evolving skill set in the advertising industry (Liu-Thompkins, 2019), this investigation will elaborate on the six core 21st-Century skills supported by the use of information and communication technology (ICT) (van Laar et al., 2017), to understand the skills required for the Paid Media Manager role, namely, technical, creativity, communication, collaboration, information management and critical-thinking skills.

Technical skills refer to the ability to use ICT to accomplish practical tasks, including domain-appropriate tools and techniques (van Laar et al., 2017). This proficiency is crucial in advertising, where technology-driven shifts have given rise to new media platforms (Helberger et al., 2020). Thus, Paid Media Managers must have technical skills to maintain a competitive advantage and establish a link between their abilities and the dynamic demands of contemporary advertising (Di Gregorio et al., 2019).

With the proliferation and diversification of media platforms, a need arises for creativity in using these various platforms to engage and connect with consumers effectively (Sasser et al., 2007). Acknowledging that each media channel represents its unique challenges and opportunities for communication (Batra & Keller, 2016), Paid Media Managers must demonstrate creativity in leveraging multiple media channels to reach and resonate with the target audience.

Despite changes in the advertising landscape, its core purpose remains to convey a message that fosters a customer's response (Carlin, 2005; Batra & Keller, 2016; Helberger et al., 2020). Therefore, communication skills are crucial in transmitting information through ICT to ensure the meaning is conveyed efficiently while considering the audience and the medium (van Laar et al., 2017). Paid Media Managers must leverage the distinctive features offered by online media channels to appropriately communicate brand information, taking into consideration each media channel's environment (Ashley & Tuten, 2015) while actively moving customers forward in their purchase path, allowing journey facilitation (Terho et al., 2022).

Journey facilitation requires creating and distributing content that closely matches customers' informational needs at various stages of the purchase funnel (Terho et al., 2022). This fosters the need for collaboration between the media and creative team (Edelman, 2007; Lynch & West, 2017), ensuring that the campaign message remains consistent across media channels

and is adapted to the specific media channels and assets that will be used in the campaign (Batra & Keller, 2016; Wu et al., 2023). Therefore, collaboration skills, which involve sharing expertise, skills, and knowledge (Lynch & West, 2017), are essential for Paid Media Managers to ensure the success of digital advertising campaigns.

Moreover, the extensive amounts of data advertisers possess regarding customer digital touchpoints (Yun et al., 2020) require media professionals to leverage that data to inform advertising decisions (Malthouse & Li, 2017). As a result, professionals within the advertising industry are increasingly expected to possess adept skills in data handling and analysis (Sweetwood, 2014) for performance optimization, forecasting results, and attributing outcomes across media actions (Huh & Malthouse, 2020). Therefore, information management is a valuable skill within the data-driven nature of advertising practice (Huh & Malthouse, 2020) as it refers to the ability to effectively collect, organize, and manage information through multiple online sources to make informed decisions (van Laar et al., 2017).

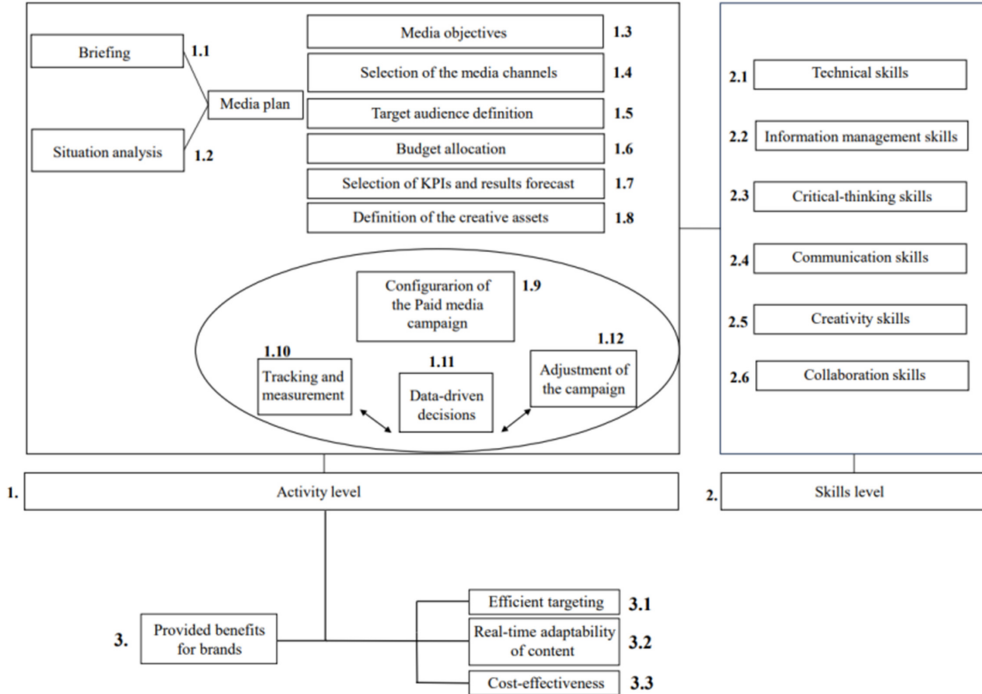
Critical thinking skills are linked to information management (Cybulski et al., 2015) and involve the ability to make informed decisions about information based on reflection and evidence. They play a fundamental role in decision-making and problem-solving (Windels et al., 2013). Paid Media Managers must have critical thinking skills to interpret data and extract meaningful and actionable insights for campaign planning and optimization (Edelman, 2007; Araújo et al., 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the reviewed literature on the advantages of digital advertising, the activities needed to be performed for the successful implementation of a digital advertising campaign, and the skills required to perform those activities by the Paid Media Manager, the authors propose the following theoretical model for analysis, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

A priori theoretical framework for the successful implementation of a digital advertising campaign, considering the role of the paid media manager



The theoretical framework proposes a model for successfully implementing a digital paid media campaign, considering the specific activities that need to be performed by the Paid Media Manager, supported by specific skills, ultimately resulting in benefits for brands. The **(1.) activity level** corresponds to all the responsibilities undertaken by the Paid Media Manager for the successful implementation of a paid media campaign in the digital environment. We started to identify the sources of information required for the Paid Media Manager to elaborate on the media plan, which can be divided into two parts: the client’s **(1.1) briefing** and the client’s **(1.2) situation analysis**. These information sources will be the basis on which Paid Media Managers will support defining the key components of the media plan. The key components shaping the media plan encompass the definition of the **(1.3) media objectives**, **(1.4) media channels**, identification of the **(1.5) target audience**, **(1.6) budget allocation**, establishment of **(1.7)**

KPIs and results forecast, and definition of **(1.8) creative assets**. The media plan will guide the **(1.9) configuration of the paid media campaign** in the chosen advertising platforms. After the campaign is configured, substantial amounts of data will be generated regarding the user's interaction with the advertisement, providing means for Paid Media Managers **(1.10) tracking and measurement**, **(1.11) data-driven decisions**, and **(1.12) adjustments of the campaign**. Simultaneously, the **(2) skills level** corresponds to the skill set required by the Paid Media Manager to implement a digital paid media campaign and assumes **(2.1) technical**, **(2.2) information management**, **(2.3) critical thinking**, **(2.4) communication**, **(2.5) creativity**, and **(2.6) collaboration skills**. Finally, **activity level (1.)** aims to create the foundation from which the brands receive the benefits of investing in digital advertising as outlined in point 3. and assumes **(3.1) efficient targeting**, **(3.2) real-time adaptability of content**, and **(3.3) cost-effectiveness**.

METHODS

Research strategy: Case study

This research aimed to answer the following question: What roles does the Paid Media Manager play in successfully implementing a digital paid media campaign? Therefore, to align with this research question, we determined that the most suitable research approach would be a descriptive qualitative approach, precisely a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2009).

The choice of this research methodology is substantiated by Yin (2009), who characterizes the case study approach as an empirical investigation well-suited for examining a current phenomenon within its context, especially when the distinctions between the phenomenon and its context are not delineated and when various sources of evidence can be employed. Since we intended to understand the role of the Paid Media Manager in implementing a successful digital advertising campaign and the benefits retrieved by brands through their investment, using a case study as a research strategy provides a real-world and context-specific perspective, offering insights that enable the bridge between theory and practice.

The empirical research was conducted in Portugal, and participants were contacted via email or LinkedIn. The participants in this study are individuals employed by small or medium-sized full-service advertising agencies and brands that invest in digital advertising. The participants selected from

advertising agencies include Paid Media Managers and one Director of Strategy, the director of the team to which the Paid Media Manager belongs. Furthermore, we opted to include brands that currently invest in digital advertising, whether internally or externally through advertising agencies, to provide a broader perspective on the benefits of digital paid advertising. The brands were selected based on the willingness of the professionals to participate in this study. The brands in the survey operate within B2C environments across various industries and share the commonality of using offline and online distribution channels. Participants can be divided into companies using digital paid advertising (users) and those in advertising agencies who are providing digital advertising services to other companies (providers).

The final sample for this study comprises seven interviews with Paid Media Managers (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) from different advertising agencies, one interview with the Director of Strategy (Participant 8) who also handles and oversees Paid Media Manager responsibilities, and five interviews with various brands (Participants 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). Table 1 outlines the profiles of the interviewees.

Table 1
Description of interviewees

No	Years of experience	User (U) or Provider (P)	Job title	Company activity	Campaign scope
1	2	Provider	Paid Media Manager	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal
2	4	Provider	Paid Media Manager	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal
3	3	Provider	Paid Media Manager	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal
4	5	Provider	Paid Media Manager	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal
5	10	Provider	Paid Media Manager	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal
6	6	Provider	Paid Media Manager	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal
7	2	Provider	Paid Media Manager	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal
8	8	Provider	Director of Strategy	Marketing services	Exclusively in Portugal

(continues)

Table 1 (conclusion)**Description of interviewees**

No	Years of experience	User (U) or Provider (P)	Job title	Company activity	Campaign scope
9	7	User	Digital Marketing Manager	Pharmaceutical	-
10	5	User	Digital Marketing Manager	Footwear	-
11	12	User	Director of Marketing	Sports Retail	-
12	7	User	Community Manager	Cosmetics	-
13	10	User	Brand Manager	Decor	-

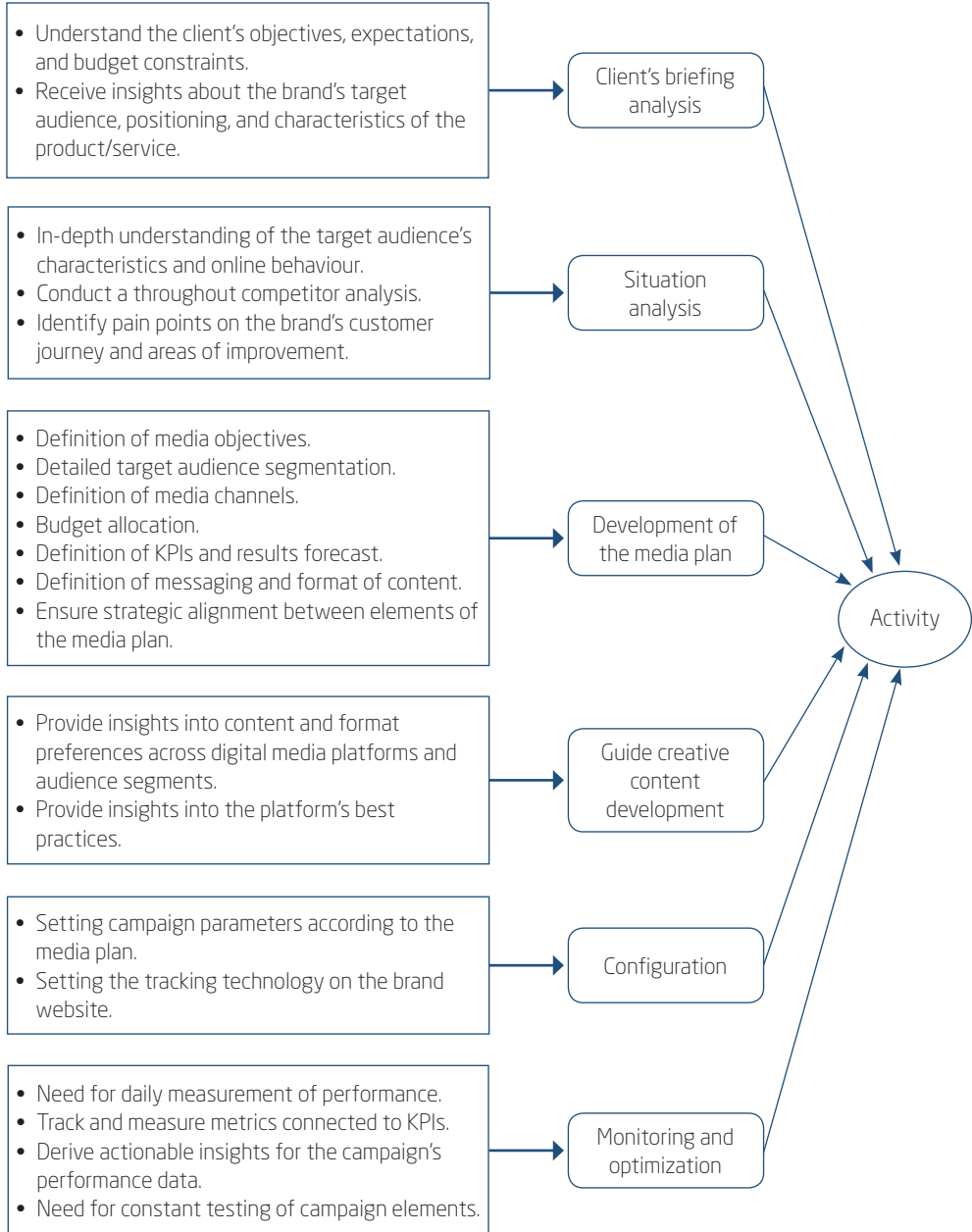
Research design

Adopting a case study methodology requires collecting information from multiple sources for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Bryman (2008) recommends triangulation, which involves employing various data sources to enrich the comprehension of the phenomenon. This method enhances the construct validity of the case study by presenting diverse perspectives through multiple pieces of evidence (Yin, 2009). This research relied on primary data gathered through thirteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

The interview process involved asking relevant, open-ended questions, allowing participants to elaborate based on their experiences (Appendices 1 and 2). This approach also empowered the researcher to introduce additional questions during the interview as pertinent topics or patterns emerged. After each interview, participants were allowed to address concerns or highlight perceived omissions in the questions. The interviews, averaging 50 minutes each, were recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed by the researcher to analyze the collected data.

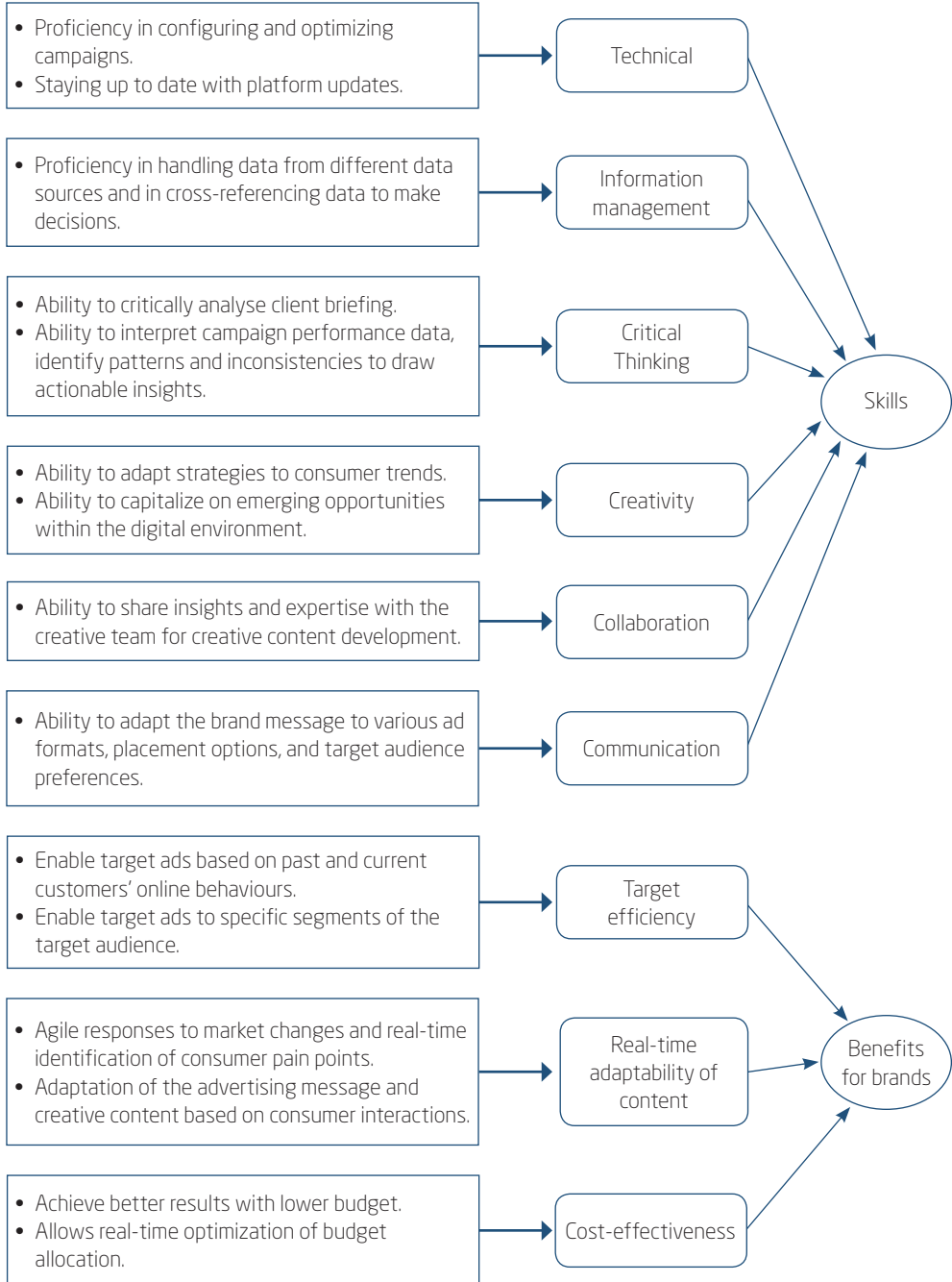
The data analysis stage is dedicated to organizing, examining, and interpreting the collected data. The Gioia Methodology was used to analyze the interviews to ensure qualitative rigor in conducting and presenting inductive research (Gioia et al., 2013). This methodology follows a phased analysis process involving initial codes, themes, and aggregated dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). First, the author analyzed and assigned codes to different data segments representing specific concepts. After coding the data, the author searched for similarities and differences to identify patterns and organize the initial categories into second-order themes. Finally, the second-order themes are grouped into aggregated dimensions. These are presented in the following framework (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Coding procedure



(continues)

Figure 2 (conclusion)
Coding procedure





DESCRIPTION OF CASE EVIDENCE

The seven Paid Media Managers participating in the study reported their active involvement in planning, configuring, monitoring, and optimizing digital advertising campaigns. Meanwhile, although not directly engaged in the operational activities, the Director of Strategy oversees and guides the managers. Additionally, the five brands interviewed expressed satisfaction with their digital advertising investments. Overall, we gained a comprehensive perspective of the Paid Media Manager's responsibilities in successful campaign implementation, the required skills, and the brand's perceived benefits of investing in digital advertising.

The following table (Table 2) presents the open-ended questions that guided the semi-structured interviews and powerful quotes from the Director of Strategy and the Paid Media Managers' responses. Participants' codes are highlighted in the first row, as indicated in Table 1.



Table 2
Interview questions and quotes from the paid media managers

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
What information do you use to plan the paid media campaign?	"(...) we conduct research for market analysis, competition analysis, and brand analysis, trying to understand how the environment can influence what the brands do, their activity, and their objectives."	"It always begins with understanding what the client wants; the client's objectives, their intended outcomes, the distinctive features of the product and the brand."	"Typically, it is conveyed through the briefing." (...) "Understand the functions of each platform and the persona you want to impact."	"We always attempt to understand the customer's pains, and potential customer's pains and desires (...) deep understand of the client's business, what they are selling, and their target audience."	-	"(...) Without a good briefing, it becomes much more difficult for us because we have to conduct extensive research."	"(...) through a client briefing, where I get an understanding of their needs;" "analyzing their account to see what has been done and what results have been achieved so far."	"Analyzing competitors and the target audience reveals their consumption patterns, behaviors, and preferred channels."
What decisions must you make to plan the digital paid media campaign?	"The channels in which we will operate, the specific stages of the sales funnel that the client wishes to invest, the budget available and its distribution, the objectives of the campaigns, the definition of KPIs (...)."	"When you choose a channel, you know what target audience is there."	"There are different stages of communication. For example, Google Ads belongs to a stage in the sales funnel, while Facebook operates in another stage."	"(...) we have to determine which audience we are going to communicate with, whether it's a cold audience, an audience of interests, or a broad audience."	"(...) we decide what will be done in media channels. How much of the budget will be spent on Google Ads, Meta Ads, or LinkedIn ads."	"Ideally, I always start by defining the campaign objectives and target audience. These are my main points because if we don't know the objective and the audience, we don't know how we will plan."	-	"Each channel can have a different strategy, and all platforms provide data to make decisions."

(continues)

Table 2 (continuation)
Interview questions and quotes from the paid media managers

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
What must you do to configure the campaign?	"At this stage, there is a collaborative role with the creative team, as they will produce the creative assets we use in the campaign's configuration."	"I will follow the media plan that the client approved, how. How will I spend on the campaign? Who is the target audience?" (...) "This part of setting up the campaign is labor."	"Currently, the platforms are very user-friendly, and putting them into practice is relatively easy. The most difficult part lies in understanding the context of each platform."	"(...) This is what builds each ad. Then it's a matter of placing the UTMs, which are the parameters we put in the link URL so that everything is there in terms of tracking and all the information matches."	"We ended up being involved in creativity because we have access to a lot of data. We have data on which copy, color, format works best (...)."	-	"We need to consider certain factors, as platforms may have limitations or the algorithms prioritize creatives with specific characteristics, and we need to discuss this with the creative team."	-
How do you select which metrics to measure?	"Our focus on key metrics will depend on the type of campaign's objective, and that will indicate whether the objective is yielding favorable results."	"(...) my efforts are on achieving the client's objectives by focusing on the metrics that effectively drive KPI success."	"If the objective is reached, I cannot focus on traffic metrics, or else I might end up making the wrong decision."	"Based on the client's objectives, as we have already discussed with the client the results we expect to achieve in each metric."	"Every day, I check the metrics, and those metrics are the ones that align with the campaign that we are working on."	"This depends on the nature of the campaign, meaning the campaign objective."	"(...) varies according to the campaign type"	"It depends because the metrics vary depending on the client's objective and the platform being used."

(continues)

Table 2 (continuation)
Interview questions and quotes from the paid media managers

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
In what situations and which actions do you take to optimize the campaign?	"When the results fall short of what was supposed to be (...) we can change the segmentation criteria. We can remove creatives not performing well and reallocate the budget."	"If it's not good, let's test and improve, but let's always continue to test until we achieve better results."	"If the campaign, as time passes, does not verify some results, we need to make changes."	"At the campaign management level, it's about understanding what is working better and what isn't." (...) "So, you can change at the creative level, (...)"	"(...) we shouldn't make changes daily because the platforms are automatically adjusting and generating data to improve the campaign."	"We must continuously conduct tests to improve the campaign. Performance drops can happen overnight; just one competitor enters, and we must be agile."	"It's necessary to conduct a careful analysis of the data to understand what happened and why so that adjustments can be made."	-
What are the challenges encountered in implementing digital paid media campaigns?	"The biggest challenge is to always stay up to date and not become obsolete."	"(...) sometimes the strategy is conditioned for what the client wants, even though I know it won't work."	"The most challenging aspect is dealing with clients that are unfamiliar and are trying out this type of solution for their businesses (...)"	"What is perceived is that paid media is a way for you to sell more, and indeed, it helps with that, but there's a crucial point: paid traffic is like a bridge (...)"	"Customers often believe that investing in digital ads means quick and easy results, but it requires a lot of work, many changes, and a lot of research on our part."	"(...) clients give us budgets very small for the goals they have and sometimes don't know what they want to do, or they have a completely wrong idea."	"There are clients who are not yet fully familiar, let's say, with the performance of digital campaigns."	"They start asking, 'What is reach? How do you calculate conversion rates?' and that's the biggest difficulty we face (...)"

(continues)

Table 2 (conclusion)
Interview questions and quotes from the paid media managers

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Which skills do you consider important to ensure that the performance of your role contributes to the success of the digital paid media campaign?	"Technical knowledge is fundamental. (...) know how to work in a team (...). The platforms make mistakes, and we must be critical regarding the results. It's not enough to analyze the data. We must understand the reasons behind."	"It is necessary to conduct a critical analysis of how the advertisements are performing", "Being creative with the data we have access to is valuable."	"The communication professional is like an actor; they need to face different characters and learn to live these lives and be able to communicate with their target audience."	"(...) think critically to deconstruct the customer's purchase and realize the best way to communicate," "There are many ways to convey the same message, so knowing how to communicate (...)"	"Knowing how to collaborate within a team," "mastering the main digital platforms," "we have to be creative within what platforms allow," "proficiency to integrate data from different sites," and "thinking critically about what we can do better for our brand."	"(...) enjoy learning and are always ready to try out new things in campaigns, and digital platforms enable us to do this because they are constantly evolving."	"(...) ability to analyze and interpret data for decision-making. For example, it's time for us to conduct new tests, it's time for us to change creativities (...)"	-

The benefits associated with the successful implementation of a digital advertising campaign

The table below (Table 3) presents powerful quotes from interviews with brands, illustrating their perspectives concerning the benefits of digital advertising investments. In the first column, participants' codes are highlighted as indicated in Table 1.

Table 3
Interview questions and quotes from brands investing in digital advertising

What are the benefits that the brand perceives from investing in digital advertising?	
9	"(...) allows for much more targeted communication to the audience and allows us to influence the decision-making process at various stages of the consumer journey. If we want to be there when they want to know something about that area or that product, we can be there."
10	"Imagine you're looking for size 37. It can be understood that whenever you visit the website, you're looking for size 37, and we can send only, for example, outlet models that are size 37, just for you."; "Digital advertising is cheaper. Therefore, we can reach a larger audience more cost-effectively."
11	"(...) the flexibility to adjust the campaign, which I believe is an asset for businesses"; "When we close a television advertisement, there's no turning back, (...) in digital advertising, within a day or two, we can change the creatives, understand if the audience is engaging (...)."
12	"(...) I know you saw my products and spent 3 minutes on my website. And I can create remarketing lists for people who are at different stages of communication"; "In paid media, you are highly dependent on the market dynamics. If you see a competitor doing something and you're not, you must adapt quickly, and digital allows for that."
13	"We started working more on A/B testing, meaning we invest less in each asset but have more assets that are being combined and tested." (...) "Imagine I'm investing 1000 euros per day, in digital I can make decisions based on today's results, in television, I have to wait, let's say a week."

There is a consensus among participants (P9, P10, P11, P12, P13) regarding the advantageous aspects of effectively implementing a digital advertising campaign. All participants acknowledged the ability to target specific audiences with the advertisement, explaining that targeted communication increases the likelihood of the brand influencing purchasing decisions at distinct customer journey stages. Four participants drew comparisons with traditional advertising, explaining that while digital advertising enables targeting customers based on their online behaviors and characteristics,

traditional advertising is akin to “firing a cannon shot in the dark, where you might hit, but you also reach many people who do not care” (P9).

Moreover, four participants identified the agility facilitated by digital advertising through the potential of adapting advertisements according to customers’ interactions. One participant further elaborates by mentioning the ability to respond promptly to market dynamics and competitive actions.

Finally, the five participants identified that investing in digital advertising offers better results at a lower cost than traditional advertising. Three participants also emphasized that the ability to make real-time adjustments in budget allocation could significantly enhance ROI efficiency.

DISCUSSION

This study attempted to advance the media planning and buying literature by deepening the understanding of the activities involved in implementing a digital advertising campaign and the essential skills required of Paid Media Managers to accomplish them proficiently. Through this research, we aim to clarify how the successful implementation of a digital advertising campaign can benefit brands investing in digital advertising.

Aligned with previous research, the results of this study confirmed the benefits of investing in digital advertising, namely the ability to target specific audience segments based on their characteristics and online behavior (Liu-Thompkins, 2019), the ability to adapt the campaign’s content to customer interactions (Yun et al., 2020), and the recognition of digital advertising as a more cost-effective solution compared to traditional advertising (Ma & Du, 2018).

Moreover, the findings suggest that reaping the benefits of digital advertising relies on how effectively the Paid Media Manager carries out the various activities involved in implementing the campaign. Successfully executing the activities involved requires a specific set of skills. In this section, we will focus on discussing the findings concerning the main activities that the Manager must perform for an effective digital advertising campaign and the skills evidenced as necessary for the proficient performance of those tasks.

Challenge the client’s briefing

The receipt of a briefing from the client marks the beginning of the digital advertising campaign implementation process, as the client seeks such services to achieve certain business objectives (Wu et al., 2023). The

planning process starts with the Paid Media Manager accessing the client's briefing. The results emphasize the importance of the briefing for shaping the paid media strategy according to the client's objectives, budget, expectations, market positioning, and product/service characteristics.

While the client's briefing serves as a crucial starting point, the findings suggest that the Paid Media Manager should not accept the briefing without critically analyzing and challenging it. By doing so, the Manager can uncover hidden opportunities or areas of improvement that the client may not have considered, such as overlooked segments of the target audience, untapped advertising channels, or issues within the customer journey. The need for critical analysis also highlights a common problem: the client's lack of digital expertise. Conducting a situation analysis is crucial to address these challenges and ensure the campaign's success. This involves analyzing the brand's past campaign performance to identify successful strategies and pain points within the customer journey, understanding the characteristics and online behaviors of the target audience, and conducting a competitive analysis to gain insights into how competing brands are positioning themselves and promoting their products/services. The results evidenced that the variety and volume of online data accessible through various tools and online platforms have greatly facilitated access to information for Paid Media Managers to draw insights for media plan development (Araújo et al., 2020).

The development of the media plan

Based on the gathered information, the paid media strategy will be defined and outlined in the media plan. The media plan should include various key components that align with each other to achieve the client's objectives. The available budget serves as a guide for determining the scope and scale of the campaign. It must be allocated towards paid media actions strategically chosen to maximize impact. After acknowledging the financial resources available, the Paid Media Manager develops the media plan. The first step is to define the media objectives, outlining what is aimed to achieve with each paid media effort employed, considering that different channels offer opportunities to connect with the target audience in different stages of the purchase funnel and that can be combined synergistically to achieve client's objectives (Batra & Keller, 2016). Simultaneously, the target audience should be precisely defined by their characteristics, and online behavior plays a significant role in determining which combination of media channels should be selected (Edelman, 2007; Batra & Keller, 2016).

Based on the media objectives and target audience, the Manager outlines the most appropriate media channels to effectively reach the audience and the distinct segments of the target audience that will be impacted within each channel. The KPIs are then negotiated with the client, who wishes to assess the impact of advertising investments on the brand's outcomes (Malt-house & Li, 2017), and a forecast of the results must be calculated to ensure alignment with the client's expectations. Furthermore, another key component that should be outlined in the media plan is the messaging, the formats, and the number of creative assets, which will guide the creative team's development of innovative content.

Guiding the development of creative content

The findings of this study suggested that the successful implementation of a digital advertising campaign requires the Paid Media Manager to guide the creative development, which involves closely collaborating with the creative team. The nature of this collaboration lies in aligning the paid media strategy with the creative content. The Paid Media Manager assumes the responsibility of providing insights regarding the paid media strategy and content preferences across target audiences and media channels. Moreover, to avoid any constraints when setting up the campaign, the Manager must provide guidelines regarding the platforms' technical requirements, which should be considered during creative content development. These findings align with Edelman (2007), who argues that designing an effective advertising campaign involves understanding the unique assets of different media platforms and strategically leveraging them to create a cohesive and impactful experience for the target audience. Thus, guided by the feedback from the Paid Media Manager, the creative team must produce the creative content accordingly.

The Manager then configures the creative content on the chosen advertising platforms and installs the tracking technology on the brand's website. This integration is essential for tracking user behavior, allowing a holistic understanding of the customer journey and how users interact with the website (Araújo et al., 2020).

Continuously testing to enhance performance

Data gathered through digital brand touchpoints, detailing user interactions with the advertisement and the customer's path to purchase, provides

Paid Media Managers with prompt access to the advertising campaign's performance (Malthouse & Li, 2017). The manager should track and measure this data, enabling data-driven decision-making, which, in turn, allows adjustments to the campaign to optimize means.

The optimization of the digital advertising campaign must be an ongoing process that involves closely monitoring campaign performance daily through metrics analysis. This analysis helps to identify areas where improvements can be made. Paid Media Managers play a crucial role in this process by adjusting various campaign elements to ensure maximum effectiveness. These adjustments often involve conducting tests wherein the manager interactively modifies aspects of the campaign, such as segmentation criteria, creative content, and budget allocation. After making changes, they evaluate the impact on the campaign's performance and, if required, make further adjustments accordingly. Through this interactive process, Paid Media Managers can pinpoint the elements that yield the most favorable results (Araújo et al., 2020).

Adjustments should be based on measuring metrics aligned with predefined KPIs (Malthouse & Li, 2017). Ignoring this practice can lead to inadequate optimizations, compromising the campaign's overall effectiveness and hindering the achievement of the intended objectives.

The skills required for effective paid media campaign implementation

The activities previously discussed and necessary for successfully implementing a digital advertising campaign require the Paid Media Manager to possess various skills. The results confirmed the skills outlined in the theoretical framework: technical, information management, critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration.

The findings underscore the need for Paid Media Managers to possess and constantly update their technical skills, overcoming the challenge of digital platforms' frequent modifications and advancements. Those skills are particularly important for configuring and optimizing platform campaigns and accessing performance metrics through data analytics tools.

Furthermore, the results highlighted the importance of Paid Media Managers' ability to integrate data from various sources, generating intelligence concerning customer interactions with the advertisement for optimization purposes. Information management skills were identified as crucial, aligning with previous research (Huh & Malthouse, 2020).

Moreover, critical thinking skills are crucial alongside information management (Cybulski et al., 2015). Those skills are required for challenging the client briefing and questioning their demands. Critical thinking is also essential when data from advertising platforms lacks consistency. In this situation, accurately evaluating campaign performance and making informed decisions becomes challenging. Thus, critical thinking allows Paid Media Managers to question assumptions and draw meaningful insights from the data for effective campaign adjustments.

Additionally, creativity is a required skill, especially for planning effective digital advertising campaigns. Creativity skills empower Paid Media Managers to fully leverage the potential of data available and find innovative ways to stand out in the competitive environment by adapting digital advertising campaigns to evolving trends and consumer preferences, experimenting with emerging media channels, and capitalizing on unique functionalities offered by each media platform.

Furthermore, Paid Media Managers must possess communication skills to effectively adapt the brand message across various media platforms, considering each channel's technical features and online environment. This involves aligning the message with customer preferences and behaviors, ensuring its relevance, and addressing customers' information needs at different stages of the purchase journey (Terho et al., 2022).

Finally, collaboration skills are critical with the creative team. The creative team and Paid Media Managers work on distinct aspects of the same campaigns. Thus, effectively sharing knowledge and expertise between the teams allows them to ensure consistency and alignment between developing creative content and the paid distribution of the advertisements (Edelman, 2007; Batra & Keller, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

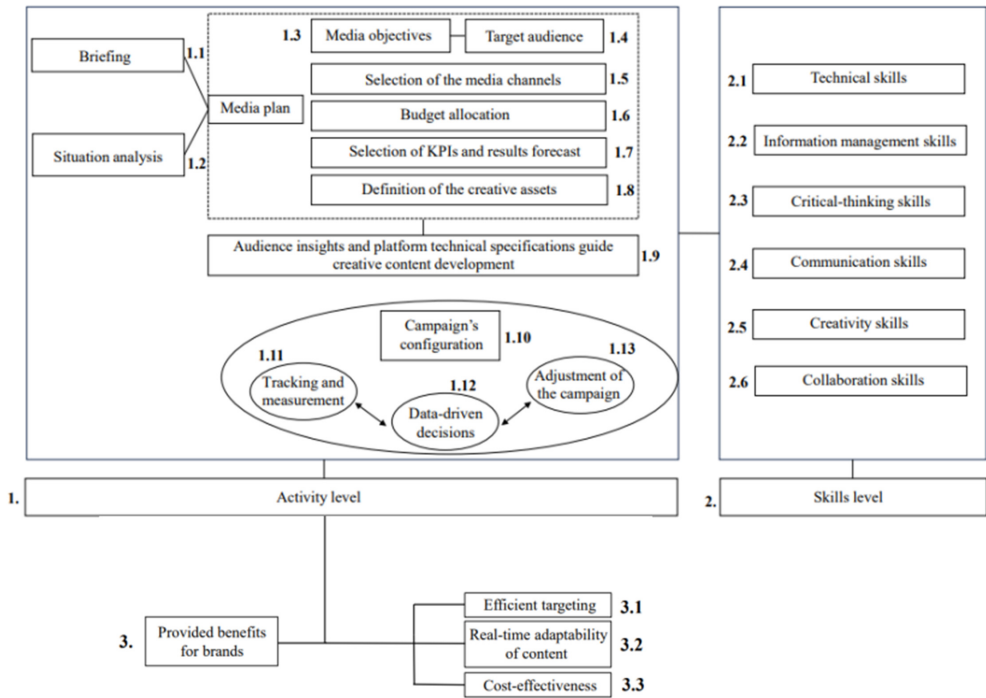
Brands have increasingly invested in digital advertising over the past few years, reflecting the evolving consumer behavior and the advantages of digital advertising (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). Although existing literature acknowledges that reaping the benefits of digital advertising requires effective media planning and buying (Araújo et al., 2020), a systematic examination of the specific activities and skills needed for successful implementation remains unexplored. Therefore, this study attempted to advance the media planning and buying literature by developing a practical model of the activities

and skills required by the Paid Media Manager to successfully implement a digital advertising campaign within the context of the advertising agency.

Based on the literature review, the *a priori* theoretical framework for the implementation success of a digital advertising campaign is considered, considering the role of the Paid Media Manager (Figure 1). The information gathered through in-depth interviews yielded additional insights, uncovering new patterns. The findings led to the refinement of the initial framework, resulting in the creation of the final theoretical framework presented in Figure 2. The framework aims to summarize the most essential elements and their dynamics.

Figure 3

Theoretical framework for the successful implementation of a digital advertising campaign, considering the role of the paid media manager



The results show that to reap (3.) the benefits offered by digital advertising, namely (3.1) efficient targeting, (3.2) real-time adaptability of content, and (3.3) cost-effectiveness, the Paid Media Manager’s focus should rest both on (1.) the activity level and (2.) the skill level.

The **(2.) skills** the Paid Media Manager possesses influence their ability to proficiently perform the **(1.) activities** needed to successfully implement the digital advertising campaign. The skill set required by the Paid Media Manager includes **(2.1) adeptness in using advertising platforms' tools**, **(2.2) organizing and managing information from multiple data sources**, and **(2.3) the ability to critically analyze that data** for effective decision-making critically. Moreover, **(2.5) creativity** and **(2.4) communication** skills are also crucial, particularly for developing campaigns that explore trends and opportunities provided by advertising platforms while ensuring that the message is tailored and effectively transmitted to the target audience across media channels. Finally, to guide creative development, Managers must have **(2.6) the ability to share knowledge and expertise** with the creative team.

On the **(1.) activity level**, the Paid Media Manager begins by examining the **(1.1) client's briefing** in conjunction with a thorough **(1.2) situation analysis**. The situation analysis helps managers challenge the client's briefing and identify gaps, laying the foundation for the definition of the paid media strategy. The paid media strategy outlined in the media plan is a blueprint for aligning the various elements to achieve the client's objectives. Initially, the Paid Media Manager defines the **(1.3) media objectives** and segments the **(1.4) target audience** according to their characteristics and online behaviors. These elements guide the Manager's decisions on the most suitable **(1.5) media channels**, **(1.6) budget allocation**, **(1.7) selection of KPIs and results forecast**, and **(1.8) definition of creative assets**. By strategically aligning all these elements, the plan ensures efficient resource utilization, effective targeting, and a benchmark for campaign performance measurement. Moreover, it was possible to conclude that the Paid Media Manager must **(1.9) guide the creative development** to ensure the alignment between the creative content and paid media strategy. Thereafter, the professional must proceed to **(1.10) technically set up the creative content on advertising platforms**, according to the strategic decisions outlined in the media plan. The volumes of data generated through customers' interactions with the advertisement enable Paid Media Managers to optimize campaign performance, which is the most crucial phase in achieving the campaign's desired results. This process involves continuously **(1.11) tracking and measuring** the metrics aligned with KPIs and making **(1.12) data-driven decisions** for **(1.13) campaign adjustments**. Therefore, capitalizing on the opportunities provided by digital advertising will help promptly adjust the campaign in response to customer interactions, ensuring efficient targeting and optimal allocation of budget across paid media actions.

Theoretical findings

This research makes significant theoretical contributions to digital advertising by advancing the understanding of the Paid Media Manager's role in implementing successful digital advertising campaigns. It bridges the existing literature on media planning and buying (Abratt & Cowan, 1999; Edelman, 2007; Araújo et al., 2020) with recent studies on the digital transformation of advertising practices (Liu-Thompkins, 2019; Yun et al., 2020; Helberger et al., 2020). First, it extends the literature on media planning and buying by identifying and categorizing the strategic decisions and operational tasks that Paid Media Managers must perform, providing a comprehensive roadmap for their direct influence on digital advertising campaigns' success. The study reinforces the importance of data-driven planning and real-time adaptability to meet market dynamics and consumer interactions. Second, this research enhances the understanding of the essential skills professionals must possess to effectively implement paid advertising campaigns, thereby enriching the existing literature on the evolving competencies required by media professionals in this new digital paradigm. Third, the research underscores the importance of synergy between strategic media planning and creative content development, showing how collaboration between Paid Media Managers and creative teams enhances campaign outcomes. Fourth, it presents a theoretical model that holistically captures the dynamics between the activities and skills of Paid Media Managers and the resulting benefits for brands. This model can be a foundation for further studies exploring additional variables influencing campaign implementation.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the results of this study offer concrete managerial guidance for implementing an advertising campaign within digital environments. We suggest four key dimensions for the implementation success of a digital advertising campaign. Firstly, managers should critically analyze the client's briefing to uncover possible gaps and to overcome the client's digital illiteracy. Secondly, a step-by-step approach to media plan development should be used to ensure the alignment between paid media actions and the client's overall objectives. Third, Managers should be close to the creative team, allowing compliance between the creative content, the paid media strategy, and the media channel's technical requirements. Finally, optimizing the campaign performance must be an interactive process of

testing different campaign elements, fueled by data regarding customers' interactions across the brand's digital touchpoints, towards achieving the best results possible in terms of KPIs.

Moreover, by pointing out the skills required to implement a successful digital advertising campaign, this investigation can guide Strategy Directors when recruiting professionals for the Paid Media Manager position. It also acknowledges the need to continuously upskill Paid Media Managers to stay updated on industry trends, platform changes, and emerging technologies.

Limitations and hinges for further research

Our study's findings and contributions present some limitations, the most significant being time constraints. While the sample was carefully selected to offer a broad perspective, the scope of the research could have been expanded with additional interviews and more comprehensive questions. This would have allowed for a deeper exploration and inclusion of an even wider range of perspectives.

Regarding future research, there are many opportunities for in-depth investigation to address the existing gaps in the literature. Incorporating quantitative methods alongside qualitative insights could support the generalizability of findings. Surveys and statistical analyses could reveal significant patterns, especially within a broader and more diverse spectrum of advertising agencies. Additionally, expanding the scope beyond small and medium-sized full-service agencies to encompass various agency types (e.g., full-service vs. media, large vs. small) could yield valuable comparative insights. Comparing the roles and responsibilities of Paid Media Managers across different agency environments could shed light on their different approaches to digital advertising campaign implementation. Furthermore, considering that distinct processes are used for B2B and B2C advertising campaigns (Swani et al., 2020), it may be pertinent to incorporate this factor under analysis.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview guide for paid media managers

1. How many years of experience do you have in this field?
2. What are your main responsibilities within the agency?
3. What information do you use to plan the paid media campaign?



4. What decisions do you need to make to plan the paid media campaign? How do you organize the necessary decisions?
5. What is your role in setting up the paid media campaign? What must you do to set up the campaign on advertising platforms?
6. What is your role in monitoring and optimizing paid media campaign performance?
7. How do you select which metrics to measure? How often do you measure those metrics?
8. In what situations do you consider optimizing the campaign? What actions do you take to optimize the campaign?
9. What challenges do you usually find in implementing paid media campaigns in the digital environment?
10. What skills do you consider important to ensure that the performance of your role contributes to the success of the paid media campaign in the digital environment?

Appendix 2. Interview guide for clients of digital advertising

1. What is your role called within the company?
2. How many years of experience do you have in digital marketing?
3. Are digital advertising services conducted internally or externally through an advertising agency?
4. Are the expected results from investment in digital advertising being achieved?
5. What are the benefits that the brand perceives from investing in digital advertising?

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