

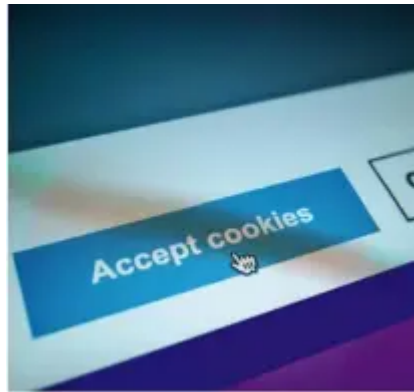
- Web cookies

Declining cookies could be worse for your privacy than accepting them

Choosing whether to accept or reject cookies is a catch-22

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Rejecting cookies may be worse for your privacy than accepting them



If you click 'reject all cookies' whenever you visit a new website, you may be revealing more about yourself than you think, says new research.

Cookies are pieces of data stored on your devices for various purposes, such as remembering your login details. They can also track your online behaviour so that companies can tailor adverts to you. Many people don't like this, whether because they want to keep their personal information private or because they don't want companies using it to sell them things.

But new research, announced at NeurIPS 2023 (an AI conference that took place in December 2023), revealed there's a particular demographic that rejects cookies more than other people – and the advertisers know this. So cookierejectors may not really be keeping their information private after all.

Cookie rejection tends to depend on your age and location. If you live in America and are over 34 years old, this is likely to be you. If you click 'reject all', the algorithm assumes you're part of this demographic and applies 'collaborative filtering' to tailor content to you. It notes what other users in this group search for and offers you the same.

"The advertisers might have five pieces of information from one person who's accepted the cookies and only two pieces of information from the person who's declined them (the website they're currently on, and the fact that they've declined cookies). But there's more information encoded in that decision," one of the study's authors, IBM research scientist Dr Elizabeth Daly, told BBC Science Focus.

The researchers believe this demographic is more likely to reject cookies because older people are less trusting of tech companies. In fact, only 28 per cent of older Americans say they accept cookies, compared to the 40 per cent of younger Americans (under 34 years old) who usually accept cookies.

Further, the US doesn't have the same data protection laws as the EU, so American users may be aware that their information is less robustly protected. The highest rate of cookie acceptance in the world is in Poland, where 64 per cent of users usually click 'accept all cookies'.

The authors hope that their research will inform policymakers when it comes to creating rules for regulating new technology like AI.