



Does marketing research suffer from methods myopia?

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ABSTRACT

The marketing discipline is repeatedly criticized for overreliance on a small set of quantitative methods which has the potential to delimit the scope of inquiries and introduce inherent method bias that undermines the trustworthiness of findings. The purpose of this research is to investigate the level of methods diversity in marketing research and to consider the impact of methods diversity on the marketing discipline. To accomplish these objectives, this study reports the results of an extensive content analysis of articles published in five leading marketing journals over a 20-year period (1990–2009): *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Marketing Science*. Results reveal a disturbing downward trend in methods diversity resulting from increasing reliance on two methods, experiments and modeling.

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1. Introduction

Research methods are grounded in disciplinary research traditions that reflect the shared beliefs within a community of researchers about which questions are most meaningful and which procedures are most important for answering those questions (Kuhn, 1970). As scholars are socialized into disciplinary research traditions, they acquire relevant theory, training in certain methods, and standards for evaluating knowledge claims, “usually as an inextricable whole” (Hunt, 2002). This practice of academic socialization is appealing as a means of promoting the development of expertise and a shared understanding among scholars in a discipline by determining which methods are taught and accepted as trustworthy. Therefore, the prevalence of experimental design in consumer behavior studies and survey research in marketing strategy investigations is not surprising.

However, marketing scholars are increasingly aware that as marketing problems become ever more complex, diversity in research methods is more likely to produce a robust understanding of marketing phenomena (Tellis, Chandy, & Ackerman, 1999). Business scholars have a growing concern that reliance on a circumscribed set of methods “promotes narrow thinking, sameness, and limited contribution beyond the pages of a journal” (Ellson, 2009, p. 1161). Indeed, marketing research is criticized for “an alarming and growing gap between the interests, standards, and priorities of academic marketers and the needs of marketing executives operating in an ambiguous,

uncertain, fast-changing, and complex marketplace” (Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009, p. 1). Is this criticism justified? That is, does marketing research suffer from methods myopia?

The purpose of this study is twofold: 1) to investigate methods diversity in marketing research by examining trends in leading marketing journals and 2) to consider the impact of the level of methods diversity on the marketing discipline. To set the context for the present study, the next section briefly summarizes the history of marketing research traditions. This summary is followed by the argument for methods diversity based on a trade-off analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of various research methods. The methods section then describes a content analysis of more than 3600 articles published in five major marketing journals over the past two decades (1990 to 2009) and presents the results. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of findings for the marketing discipline.

2. Marketing research traditions

2.1. Is marketing a science?

During the 1950s and 1960s, the marketing discipline sought to establish its credentials as a rigorous discipline, precipitated by the provocative question posed by Bartels (1951): “Is marketing a science?” Answering this question was important because marketing scholars believed that to be legitimate, the discipline must be considered a science (Chalmers, 1982; Easton, 2002). Much debate ensued in the literature over the next few decades with some marketing scholars proclaiming marketing as a science and others believing marketing to be an art or practice. Although the dispute never produced consensus, marketing scholars agreed that the answer partially depended on gaining

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agreement on the controversial issue of the domain of marketing. If its scope were broad enough, then marketing could be considered a science because the discipline possessed three key hallmarks: (1) a body of literature that included description and classification; (2) discoveries of regularities in phenomena, and; (3) researchers committed to the scientific method (Hunt, 2002). The debate eventually waned as more and more scholars agreed that a universal standard does not exist for either science or the scientific method and the ebb and flow of controversy is needed for marketing research to demonstrate its viability (Levy, 2005). Chalmers (1982) argues that a discipline is defended based on its aims and the methods to achieve those aims, which are not static and thus not something that can be determined in advance. Deshpande (1983) proposes these aims are established by the scientific paradigms or philosophies to which a community of researchers adheres.

2.2. Philosophy of science and methods

Concurrent with the debate about the scientific nature of the marketing discipline, the primary philosophy guiding epistemology in marketing underwent an evolution. In response to criticisms of a lack of rigor in the 1950s, marketing scholars adopted a positivist approach to research and theory development (Easton, 2002). As arguments ensued, the driving paradigm transformed into logical empiricism (in reaction to idealism) and then realism (in response to relativism). Philosophy of science scholars note that many versions of realism exist (Easton, 2002; Hunt, 2010), and this dialogue occasionally resurfaces in the literature.

By governing assumptions about the world, a discipline's philosophy of science prescribes the problems that are explored and the methods used to attack them (Deshpande, 1983; Easton, 2002). Thus philosophy of science and method are linked; if a community of scholars accepts certain assumptions about the world, they also accept the tools associated with that philosophy. Consequently, the mid-century call for increased rigor was interpreted by many marketing scholars as the need to rely more heavily on methods accepted in the marketing discipline (Levy, 2005). The result is a 60-year history of marketing research dominated by a relatively small set of quantitative methods, which affects every aspect of the discipline from research to publishing to educating future scholars and managers. Yet many marketing scholars who participated in either side of the various debates agree with Hunt (2002) when he concludes that a narrow view in a discipline can seriously circumscribe research and other scientific inquiry.

3. The argument for methods diversity

The aim of marketing research is to expand the body of knowledge by explaining, predicting, and understanding human behavior related to marketing phenomena (Hunt, 2010). Thus marketing research involves some population of actors engaged in some type of behavior in the context of a particular time or place. Research design is concerned with optimizing (1) *precision* in measurement of variables related to the behavior of interest, (2) *realism* for the context in which behaviors are observed, and (3) *generalizability* of results across relevant populations (McGrath, 1981). As discussed in the following sections, the researcher's choices that maximize any one concern are likely to pose a threat to the other two; that is, the strengths of a research method with regard to one concern are often the main weaknesses with respect to another concern.

3.1. Trade-offs in research methods

Simultaneously optimizing all three concerns within a single research method is not possible; therefore, understanding the inherent trade-offs in choosing research methods is critical. On the one hand,

precision ensures confidence that results are reliable and would be the same if the study were repeated; however, precision requires control of research operations that limits realism and generalizability. On the other hand, realism is desirable to capture valid, accurate representations of marketing phenomena, but realistic research settings lack controls needed to achieve precision (Levy, 2005). Methods that maximize generalizability are also often low on realism because the researcher attempts to neutralize the confounding effects of context by probing behaviors unrelated to the context within which they are elicited. The consequences of research design choices are considered in the following discussion of trade-offs as they relate to concerns for precision, realism, and generalizability of findings.

3.2. Precision

Research methods such as experiments and simulations strive for high levels of measurement precision by controlling the research setting. For example, laboratory experiments are conducted in artificial settings engineered to minimize the potential influence of theoretically irrelevant contextual variables. By their very design, laboratory experiments maximize precision by sacrificing realism.

The lack of realism creates several problems for the researcher. Respondents may react to the experimental situation itself, rather than the variable of interest, generating reactive error (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). In addition, the research design may create demand artifacts, a phenomenon in which the respondents attempt to guess the purpose of the experiment and respond accordingly (Perrien, 1997). For example, while viewing tests of a commercial, subjects may recall pre-treatment questions about a brand and guess that the commercial is trying to change their attitudes toward the brand (Lane, 2000). Finally, findings from laboratory experiments tend to have low generalizability because they are conducted in artificial environments and rely on whatever sample of subjects the researcher can persuade to visit the lab (Laurent, 2000). Thus laboratory experiments "may be appropriate for theory-testing research, but not for effects research aimed at direct empirical generalization" (Sterthal, Tybout, & Calder, 1987, p. 114).

3.3. Realism

Natural settings assure the context for a study is existentially real for participants. Methods that aim for the highest levels of realism (e.g., field observation, ethnographic studies) are solidly grounded in the research subject's everyday reality. By their very nature, such studies embrace contextual factors and, thereby, reduce control and precision of measurement. Controlling the extraneous variables in a natural environment is not possible because the variables are too numerous and too complex (Patzner, 1996). Methods that intrude on informants' normal routines in natural settings (e.g., field experiments, depth interviews) compromise realism to some extent in order to achieve greater precision with respect to measurement of behavior.

Methods that aim to maximize realism are necessarily limited to the informants found in the research setting, which seriously constrains the generalizability of findings. Caution is warranted when conducting research in a real world context as findings might be too event specific (e.g., rafting on a river) (Levy, 2005). In addition, field experiments may involve high research expense, time diseconomies, and political barriers (e.g., organizational policy does not allow research) that limit the reliability of the study and generalizability of findings (Rangaswamy & Krishnamurthi, 1991).

3.4. Generalizability

Research methods primarily concerned with generalizability of findings attempt to maximize reliable sampling of populations,

whether they are comprised of individuals, organizations, networks, or other social entities. Ensuring a realistic research environment is not a concern for such methods because the research setting does not play a part in explaining the behavior of interest. For example, survey design neutralizes the effect of context by soliciting informant behaviors (i.e., answering questions) that are not related to the research setting (e.g., home, office, classroom). Similarly, modeling relies on archival data collected for some other purpose, such as point-of-sale data collected by retailers, where the setting is not relevant to the study.

These methods often compromise precision in order to achieve generalizability. For example, survey research is often criticized for its reliance on retrospective perceptions of informants. Statistics are reported to lend confidence to the reliability of survey findings, but they do not reveal information about the fundamental accuracy of informants' reports. Researchers who use archival data to build models are required to choose elements from existing data sets as proxies for the behavior of interest. While the accuracy of the model itself is carefully estimated, the validity of the relationship between the proxy and the actual behavior is typically unexamined.

3.5. The argument for methods diversity

The trade-offs described above provide the foundation for the argument for methods diversity in marketing research. By using an appropriate mix of methods in the marketing discipline, the weaknesses of one method (i.e., lack of realism, low precision, limited generalizability) can be mitigated by the strengths of other methods (Deshpande, 1983). Thus understanding "how best to *combine* multiple strategies...so that information can be gained about a given problem by *multiple means that do not share the same weaknesses*" becomes an important consideration (italics in original; McGrath, 1981, p. 189). Integrating diverse research methods, in a single study or across a research program, broadens understanding of marketing phenomena by using different approaches to better understand, explain, and build on results from other approaches (Creswell, 2003).

Methods diversity enhances the robustness of marketing research in several ways. First, diversity in methods addresses concerns for common method bias that calls into question the validity of research findings (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Second, methods diversity affords the ability to triangulate findings across studies. Results from studies that use diverse methods can produce more compelling findings by demonstrating convergent and complementary results that increase confidence in findings. Similarly, studies that use different methods and discover contradictory findings open doors to new avenues of inquiry that also contribute to knowledge development in the discipline. Third, methods diversity in a discipline is supportive of theory generation (Deshpande, 1983; Tellis et al., 1999). A narrow focus on methods appropriate for theory testing, such as experiments or modeling, is likely to discourage theory generation in favor of increasingly marginal knowledge gains.

However, implementing multiple methods research poses several challenges for researchers. The time commitment necessary for learning new methods and conducting multiple methods studies poses a significant challenge to implementing multiple methods research (Davis, Golicic, & Boerstler, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This obstacle can be overcome through collaboration with a diverse team of researchers with the necessary expertise. Team-based research brings more resources to a project, including multiple skill sets and perspectives, which can alleviate the increased time commitment. Another set of difficulties arise in the publishing process. Journal page constraints often pose a challenge to adequately reporting multiple methods studies. In addition, reviewers may not be familiar with how to evaluate multiple methods studies. Perhaps publishing issues will lessen as the prevalence of multiple methods studies increases.

4. Method

4.1. Sample and data collection

The present study examined marketing journals recognized as publishing high quality, relevant marketing research: the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (JAMS), *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR), *Journal of Marketing* (JM), *Journal of Marketing Research* (JMR), and *Marketing Science* (MKS). Tellis et al. (1999) argue that JCR, JM, JMR, and MKS are a good representation of the field. The current study also included JAMS because the journal is used in other such reviews (e.g., Svensson, 2006; Yadav, 2010) and is the leading journal of a major international marketing organization, the Academy of Marketing Science. A 20-year time period was selected to capture trends in research methods. A five-member research team reviewed every article published in the five journals for the 20-year period from 1990 through 2009. Specific volume and issue numbers for each journal are noted in Table 1.

4.2. Data analysis

Each researcher reviewed a sub-sample of articles, and all followed the same procedure, which was very similar to that used by Stremersch, Verniers, and Verhoef (2007). Researchers manually checked each article starting with the abstract, followed by the introduction and method sections, and including the entire article if necessary. All articles with fewer than four pages and those labeled as a reflection or review (e.g., software or book) were excluded, yielding a total sample of 3656 articles. Each article was first classified as conceptual or empirical. Empirical articles (3027 in total) were then examined to determine the specific methods employed. Articles were also classified by broad subject area using JM classifications. This information, along with journal, volume, issue, and authors, was logged into a spreadsheet that was compiled when the reviews were completed.

4.3. Reliability of findings

To check classification reliability, a randomly drawn subset of 73 articles (2% of the sample) was independently verified by a second researcher (Krippendorff, 1980; Stremersch et al., 2007). Coding was verified on four classification criteria for each article: (1) type of article—conceptual or empirical; (2) quantitative methods—experiment, model, survey, or other quantitative; (3) qualitative methods—ethnography, interviews, case study, or other qualitative, and; (4) subject area. The reliability check yielded an 82% match with initial classifications.

5. Results

Findings show that research published in the top marketing journals over the past 20 years relies heavily on quantitative methods,

Table 1
Summary of methods classification by journal.

Journal ^a	Total articles	Conceptual	Empirical
JAMS	637	175	462
JM	692	175	517
JMR	792	40	752
JCR	923	82	841
MKS	612	157	455
Total	3656	629	3027

^a JAMS—Volume 18(1)–Volume 37(4).
JM—Volume 54(1)–Volume 73(6).
JMR—Volume 27(1)–Volume 46(6).
JCR—Volume 16(4)–Volume 36(4).
MKS—Volume 9(1)–Volume 28(6).

which are reported in 90% of the empirical studies. Furthermore, three quantitative methods—experiments, models, and surveys—are reported in 85% of studies. A closer examination of the data reveals a significant upward trend in the use of experiments and modeling beginning in 2002 (see Fig. 1).

On average, experiments and surveys are nearly equal from 1990 to 2001 (averaging 42 and 39 studies per year, respectively), followed by modeling (26 per year), other quantitative methods (14 per year), and qualitative methods (10 per year). However, experiments and modeling nearly double in the period from 2002 to 2009; the average use of experiments rises from 41 to 81, while the use of modeling increases from 26 to 46. In contrast, the use of surveys, other quantitative methods (e.g., meta-analysis, content analysis) or qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, ethnography, case study) remains relatively unchanged. Fig. 2 illustrates the increasing divergence between experiments and modeling versus all other methods. The use of experiments and modeling in marketing studies is now over 70% and rising. Potential consequences of the decline in methods diversity are discussed subsequently.

6. Discussion

Does marketing research suffer from methods myopia? Findings in this study suggest the answer is yes. While 85% of empirical studies across the 20-year period rely on three quantitative methods, an increasing reliance in the marketing discipline on only two methods—experiments and modeling—is driving a disturbing downward trend in methods diversity (i.e., a growing lack of diversity).

6.1. Adverse consequences of declining methods diversity in the discipline

Given the decline in methods diversity found in the current study, the growing concern that the marketing discipline is experiencing an increasing relevance gap between its research output and real problems in the marketplace is not surprising. Methods diversity is particularly important for marketing research because marketing phenomena are multifaceted (Tellis et al., 1999). The research methods chosen should be driven by the research questions asked. Due to the complexity of marketing problems, no single type of research question, and thus method, will fully capture a specific phenomenon. Therefore, methods diversity is more likely to lead to

more reliable and valid insights into marketing problems. For example, information revealed by consumers in surveys or lab experiments is often quite different from what researchers learn in long, open-ended interviews or by observing behavior in a natural setting. Reliance on an increasingly limited set of methods constrains inquiry to only those phenomena and questions that are amenable to the dominant approaches. Recall that experiments offer a high level of precision and modeling is often provides results that can be generalized. Realism in the research setting is a weakness of both methods. Thus marketing research appears to be increasingly sacrificing realism needed to assure validity of findings.

Consider the area of marketing strategy. Cross-sectional analyses using large data sets seek to establish causal relationships between various factors and marketplace success. For example, overwhelming support for pioneering advantage is reported in the marketing literature. However, this finding relies on a single source, PIMS (Profit Impact from Market Strategy) data, and a single method, modeling of survey data (Golder & Tellis, 1993). A different quantitative method, historical analysis, provides evidence for a much lower market share for pioneers and reduced rewards for pioneering, compared to results reported in studies that rely on models of PIMS data (Golder & Tellis, 1993). Differences in findings are attributed to survival bias (i.e., PIMS excludes pioneers that fail and disappear) and the lack of reliability of self-reported data by single informants. A discipline with a commitment to methods diversity might avoid propagating such myths by systematically submitting findings to alternative methods.

Heavier reliance on experiments and modeling raises the probability that critical factors, those that might better explain observed variance in behaviors, are absent in the research setting. “If *A* causes *B*, then there must be no factor *Z* that, if introduced into the explanation, would make the systematic association between *A* and *B* vanish” (Hunt, 2002, p. 127). The lack of methods diversity often blinds researchers to the third variable, factor *Z*. This limitation constrains marketing from tackling the increasingly complex phenomena present in the marketplace. Although the current focus on two methods ensures greater levels of expertise in those methods, this dangerously low level of methods diversity allows weaknesses to proliferate. Any effort to address this threat by increasing methods diversity in the marketing discipline requires individual researchers to consider broadening their methodological toolkits.

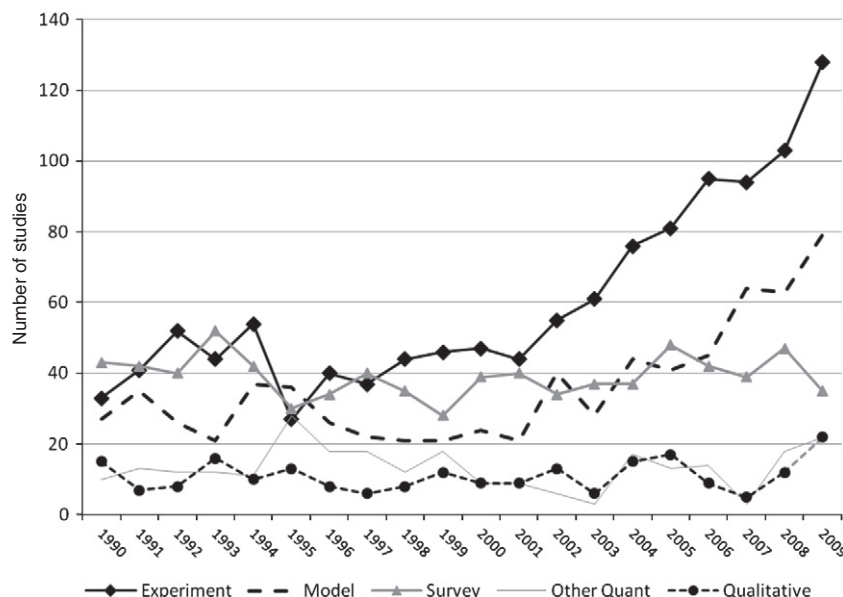


Fig. 1. Trends in methods by year.

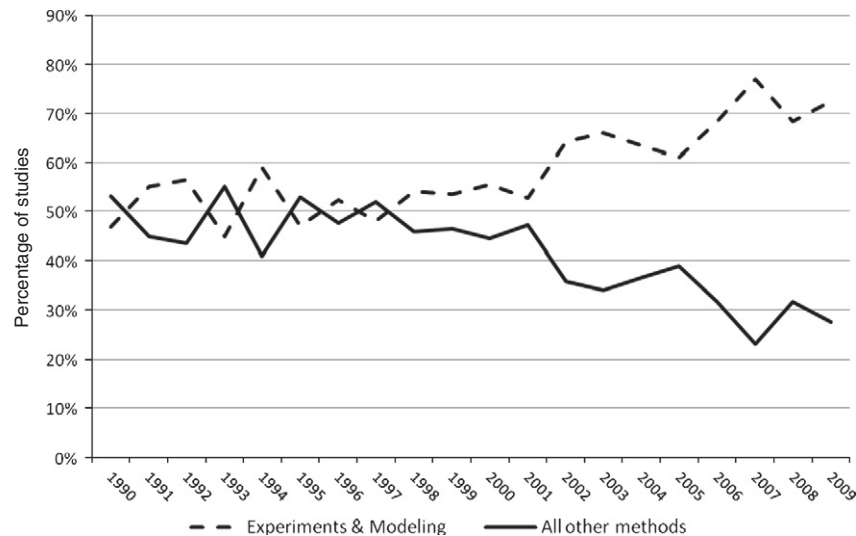


Fig. 2. Trend in methods diversity.

6.2. Implementing methods diversity in a research program

A growing body of literature offers guidance on how to design and implement multiple methods research in a single study or in a program of research (e.g., Creswell, 2003; Davis et al., 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Multiple methods research designs integrate diverse approaches at different stages of the research process. The choice of methods and nature of the integration depends on the research purpose.

Following the scientific method, researchers begin with an idea or question about a particular phenomenon and then develop research questions to sharpen the focus of their studies. The choice of research methods depends on the nature of the phenomenon and the type of research questions. When the phenomenon of interest is new, dynamic, or complex, field-based, qualitative methods are often the preferred starting point in order to build understanding of relevant variables grounded in detailed descriptions of the phenomenon. In contrast, research questions aimed at examining variation or demonstrating causality among well-research constructs are ideal for a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2003). Research that uses multiple methods (i.e., moves back and forth between different qualitative and/or quantitative methods) has the greatest chance of fully capturing the focal phenomenon by optimizing precision, realism, and generalizability.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) describe four basic research purposes for multiple methods studies: (1) *development*; (2) *initiation*; (3) *complementarity*, and; (4) *interpretation*. In the development design, the researcher uses the results from the first method to design a subsequent study that uses a different method, thereby expanding the insights generated about the research phenomenon. Similarly, the initiation design uses results from one study to inform a second study; however, the initiation design differs from the development design in that the first study is less heavily weighted, compared to the primary method used in the main study. The purpose of the complementarity design is to simultaneously examine different, but complementary, data about a phenomenon to address the research question. The interpretation design is used when the researcher anticipates the need to explain or confirm findings; a secondary, less heavily weighted method is employed to support results obtained from the primary method.

As one example, sustainability is a salient phenomenon in current marketing research and a fertile area that could benefit from a

multiple methods approach. Much of this research is still trying to understand the phenomenon of sustainability, and qualitative methods are particularly effective for understanding the nature of experiences and researching areas where little previous knowledge exists (Mello & Flint, 2009). The first step in conducting qualitative research is data collection through methods such as case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. Data collection techniques include asking open-ended questions and examining multiple data sources, which can take the form of field-based interviews, observations, document analysis, and examination of audiovisual materials (Hirschman, 1986; Maxwell, 1996). These data are then used to describe the phenomenon, often with the goal of building substantive theory. Findings from the qualitative approach might then be further developed in a quantitative study (e.g., survey, model) designed to test the emerging theory in order to generalize findings.

6.3. Conclusion

Marketing is a complex and evolving discipline; thus, many of the phenomena of interest are precisely the type of concepts that could benefit from the use of diverse methods to address diverse research questions. Without a doubt, marketing research made impressive progress from the early days of predominantly descriptive research toward the adoption of rigorous, sophisticated research methods that support theory development. Marketing scholars eagerly incorporated into their research designs the analytical tools and extensive data sets made available by advances in information technology in the 1990s. Unfortunately, the adoption of sophisticated quantitative methods appears to be a contributing force in driving a downward trend in methods diversity. Methods diversity holds promise for advancing the marketing discipline and expanding knowledge beyond that obtained from reliance on an increasingly limited set of quantitative methods. Marketing research that relies on a diversity of methods produces “stronger results, larger contributions, and greater impact” (Stewart, 2009, p. 382). Perhaps the findings of the present study will stimulate a conversation among scholars about the potential hazards of methods myopia and benefits of methods diversity for the marketing discipline.

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