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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 (Patzer, 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,

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