Article

The changing role of the marketing researcher in the age of digital technology: Practitioner perspectives on the digitization of marketing research

Robert Cluley (iD)
University of Nottingham, UK

William Green
University of Leicester, UK

Richard Owen
Hall & Partners, UK

Abstract

After years of hype, marketing researchers are now facing the challenge of integrating new digital technologies into their work. Based on an analysis of 44 key informant interviews with marketing research practitioners, the study develops a framework to describe the main benefits and challenges of digital technologies in marketing research, as perceived by marketing researchers themselves. It highlights successful strategies that have been employed to exploit digital technologies and suggests that the role of the market researcher is changing in the age of digital data. The marketing researcher of the future must fulfill the roles of being a *social scientist* and a *storyteller*. In both cases, although researchers may need to develop technical skills, it is also essential that they develop the ability to engage their clients, add value, and interpret data. Implications for industry and academia are discussed.

Corresponding author:
William Green, School of Business, University of Leicester, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK.
Email: w.green@leicester.ac.uk

Introduction

This study explores the changing working practices among leading market researchers seeking to take advantage of digital technology. Although much research has focused on the ways that researchers can exploit new digital data sources such as transactional databases, online tracking and behavioral data from smartphones and other Internet devices, the marketing research industry has also been exploring how to utilize similar technologies to design bespoke primary research projects for their clients. For example, rather than harvesting naturalistic data from online message boards or social networks, brands may create their own message boards to replace traditional diary studies. Such innovation has received less attention in the literature but are the focus of this article.

It presents an analysis of semi-structured, key-informant interviews ($N = 44$) with design, digital, branding, and marketing researchers in London, UK. Respondents were asked to describe their perception of and experiences using digital technology and to highlight the challenges and concerns they face when using both primary and secondary forms of digital data.

Analysis reveals that marketing researchers see benefits for themselves, their clients, and research participants at every stage in the research process. But many of these benefits come at a cost. They have created new tasks which do not sit easily within traditional patterns of work in the marketing research industry. As such, marketing researchers describe how they are changing their ways of working to incorporate digital technology.

We suggest that these changes can best be framed by thinking about marketing research through two new roles. The first role is akin to the classic *social scientist*. They collect, analyze, and report data to an interested community. They are embedded in technologies and both primary and secondary (third-party) datasets. They continuously monitor participants and report topline findings to other stakeholders. The second role is the *storyteller*. They work closely with clients, engaging them in the research process, and use the findings produced by social scientists to bring consumers to life. They are more like strategic consultants. We conclude that many firms are reorganizing marketing research around these roles and that academic researchers, marketing educators and practitioners need to recognize how the role of marketing research is evolving in the age of digital data.

The promise of digital data

The context for this research centers on the use of digital technology in marketing practice. For over a decade, academics, practitioners, and industry commentators have argued that marketing is undergoing a paradigmatic shift thanks to the availability of digital data (George, Haas, & Pentland, 2014; Goffin, Varnes, van der Hoven, & Koners, 2012; Kitchin, 2014). The increased quantity of data now available to researchers and practitioners, thanks to digital technologies such as smart phone and personal computers, combined with increased computational power, allows them to make data-driven decisions (Anderson, 2008). In place of intuition, experience, or theory, brands can customize products and optimize promotions on a real-time basis to individual consumers—what Dibb (2001) calls *segments of one*—using transaction data, location data, and web and social media activity (Cluley & Brown, 2015). As a result, many job adverts for marketing roles now specify that only "digital natives" should apply (Cluley & Green, 2019).

For marketing researchers in particular, digital technology has tremendous benefits. It allows them to capture rich data such as photos, videos, and online messages and social media posts. Through these new data sources, researchers can embed the consumer in marketing decisions (Bosch-Sijtsema & Bosch, 2015). Indeed, through a survey of managers in the United States and Canada, Durmuşoğlu and Barczak (2011) conclude that such data has a positive effect on new product development.

Yet, research increasingly questions the effectiveness of digital technology in marketing practice. In terms of new product development, for example, Roberts and Candi (2014) report that using social media to conduct market research does not contribute to business performance and was actually found to have a negative relationship with profitability and market growth. A dominant explanation for this failure is that marketers lack technical skills and organizational support to take advance of digital technology. Saren (2011), for example, suggests that "the technical capabilities of IT has far outstripped most marketeers' knowledge and capability to utilize it" (p. 40). In response, there have been calls for marketing educators to shift the curriculum to support practitioners. In this, there has been a focus on developing technical skills from data science and computer programming (see Festervand & Harmon, 2001; Shugan, 2004).

Interestingly, Quinn, Dibb, Simkin, Canhoto, and Analogbei (2016) report that marketing practitioners find such claims problematic. Many of the key informants they interview report that they are experiencing an identity crisis as the interpretative soft skills which they have developed throughout their careers are meant to have become outdated. They explained that although they feel they are expected to develop new digital skills, in reality, many of their activities have not changed significantly (see also Ford, 2014). Indeed, in the context of marketing research, very few studies have actually explored what skills practitioners use (Wright & Wagner, 2011).

Against this background, the study set out to allow practicing marketing researchers to describe their experiences and perceptions of digital technology. Given that one of the supposed benefits of such technology is that it represents the consumer or user voice in marketing decisions, it is curious that, to date, few studies have actually asked the users of these technologies what role they have had. The study aims to generate fresh insight on key issues that may explain why some organizations have been unable to extract the full benefit of digital data, both primary and secondary. These include the following: Are the benefits of digital data impeded by technical skill shortages? Is there a role for more traditional interpretative skills in the age of digital data? What factors impede the use of digital data in marketing practice?

Research design

Fieldwork for this study involved 44 key informant interviews. Participants, who were interested in understanding the changing role of technology in marketing practice, were recruited through a Market Research Society (MRS) award-winning organization. This organization identified lead users and early adopters of digital data-gathering tools from their client database and supported access for the authors. In this case, we refer to tools which have been designed to collect primary data from consumers, for example, mobile survey applications which include the facility to prompt and request information from the consumer including photographs and videos, digital diaries, and online forums. This project did not focus on passively tracked behavioral data.

At the time of the interviews, all participants worked for leading design, digital, branding, and market research agencies in London. The United Kingdom is the leading center for marketing research outside of North America. It is estimated to be the strongest in Europe—employing 60,000 people and worth over £3 billion (MRS, 2012a). The influence of the UK industry is reflected economically as 33% of the industry turnover is generated internationally (MRS, 2012b, p. 22). Participants worked on research projects across a broad range of methods and sectors including pharmaceuticals, fashion, media, transport, and fast-moving consumer goods. They are labeled here as Researchers but, in reality, few interviewees had that job title. Rather, their job titles ranged from participant manager, narrator, insight director to brand director (see Table 1 participants).

The purposive sampling strategy for this research did not aim to be representative of the job roles within the market research industry; our inclusion criteria incorporated only individuals with

Table 1. Participant pseudonym, company, and position.

ID	Name	Company type	Position
1	Lain	Design agency	Innovation manager
2	Robert	Strategic brand consultancy	Narrator
3	Rachel	Strategic brand consultancy	Project engager
4	Jane	Design agency	Digital research manager
5	Peter	Marketing and branding	Research manager
6	Roisin	Design agency	Consumer research manager
7	Dan	Marketing and branding	Project manager
8	Paul	Media producer	Central audience researcher
9	Jenna	Design agency	Project director
10	Anne-Marie	Strategic research	Senior researcher
11	Hendrik	Market analysis	Researcher
12	Stephen	Communication and marketing	Researcher
13	Deborah	Market research	Researcher
14	John	Market research	Researcher
15	Simon	Market research	Senior researcher
16	Katherine	Market research	Junior researcher
17	Tania	Market research	Field team
18	Lisanne	Market research	Field team
19	Kelly	Market research	Senior researcher
20	Penelope	Multimedia	Internal broker
21	Henrietta	Consumer market	Researcher
22	Alexia	Strategic research	Researcher
23	Trevor	Strategic research	Researcher
24	Guiseppe	Strategic brand consultancy	Researcher
25	Corinne	Market research	Researcher
26	Matthew	Market and policy research	Researcher
27	Fabian	Media agency	Insight team
28	Georgios	Media agency	Propositions
29	James	Media agency	Planning
30	William	Media agency	Insight
31	Amanze	Media agency	Brand executive
32	Lynne	Media agency	Customer experience
33	Chris	Media agency	Brand director
34	Tracey	Media agency	Product manager
35	Caroline	Media agency	Brand executive
36	Ulrike	Media agency	Head of research
37	Silvia	Media agency	Insight communications
38	Badi	Media agency	Insight director
39	Piotr	Media agency	Customer experience
40	Mariam	Strategic research	Researcher
41	Zara	Communications	Product manager
42	Victoria	Communications	Product manager
43	Geoffrey	Communications	Product manager
44	Martin	Communications	Product manager

experience of working with digital tools which are specifically designed to capture rich data, digitally directly from consumers. These are the workers who collect, manipulate, analyze, and draw insight from primary market research.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted for 1hr each on average. To investigate marketing researchers' perceptions of digital technologies and to explore how they utilize them in their practices, participants were first asked to describe their route into the marketing research industry and current job role. They were then asked to describe a typical project from start to finish. Respondents were asked to describe their perception of and experiences using digital technologies, to highlight the challenges and concerns they face when using digital data.

Interviews were transcribed and managed within QSR International's NVivo software. In all, 15 interviews were not recorded due to sensitivities and non-disclosure agreements but note-taking was permitted throughout the interviews. These notes, along with other field notes, were transcribed and included in the dataset. Two of the authors separately coded the dataset around the following key themes: *the benefits of digital data* and *the challenges of digital data.* Through discussions between the authors, it was clear that interviewees perceived both benefits and challenges at each stage in the research process. Here, it was notable that although digital technologies might be assumed to save time and effort, many of the benefits have created new tasks. It was also clear that, in completing these tasks, researchers saw their traditional roles and ways of working change. Rather than describe a requirement for technical skills and digital literacy, interviewees described a requirement for interpretative skills and explained how traditional divisions among teams, methodologies, and levels of seniority are being redrawn to incorporate digital data into marketing research practice.

Findings: the benefits and challenges of digital data

This section illustrates the main benefits and challenges of digital technology and digital data sources as perceived by marketing researchers. These are presented through the four typical stages of a marketing research project: planning, data gathering, analysis, and reporting. The four stages are summarized in Table 2.

Planning

The dominant benefits perceived by marketing researchers in the planning stage of research concern the availability of digital data. However, they acknowledge that the benefits they derive from the availability of data differ for their clients. Clients, they believe, are primarily motivated by the low cost of collecting data through digital technology. But, for researchers, digital data is a new methodology—not simply a cheaper way to run traditional research.

Cheap and efficient. Marketing researchers believe that clients are attracted to digital technology "because it saves money" (P8, Paul, Central Audience Researcher, Multimedia corporation). Interviewees observe that clients often perceive traditional methods to be too expensive. Digital data are presumed to be cheaper to gather and analyze because digital technology can automate much of the work traditionally done by researchers.

Large samples. Marketing researchers believe that their clients find digital technology appealing because they think it is easier to capture large datasets in comparison with traditional research methods. This benefit follows on from a traditional quantitative methodology where larger samples are assumed to be more robust and representative.

Table 2. Benefits and challenges of digital technology as perceived by marketing researchers.

Project phase	Perceived benefits			Challenges and problems		
	Client	Market researcher	Participant	Client	Market researcher	Participant
Project design	Cheap and efficient; large samples; new insight	Complement existing methods; new insight	Incentives and flexible participation	Project constraints	Inflexible design	
Data gathering	Continuous findings and project evaluation	Participant monitoring and management; closer to the client	Convenience		Ethics; completion anxiety; lack of control	Confusion and continuous monitoring
Data analysis		Synchronous and automated analysis; scope of interpretation		Partial analysis	Distance from raw data	Potential for follow-up
Final reporting	Access to rich unstructured data	Access to rich unstructured data		Ownership and control	Distilling data	

New insight. For marketing researchers, the main benefit of digital technology in the planning stage of research is that they can design projects which get closer to the consumer. They treat "digital" as a unique methodology that allows them to access consumer experiences through "kind of live, in the moment responses" that were either too costly, too time-consuming, unethical, or simply impossible to capture using traditional methods (P26, Matthew, Researcher, Market and policy research company). For example, Simon (P15), a Senior Researcher at a marketing research agency, explained that digital tools allowed him to track air passengers "right from home to destination . . . it was something that we couldn't really get at ourselves unless you went and met someone at their house and went with them the whole way." Researchers also reported that some clients were beginning to demand digital methods when they want "to really get much closer to real behaviour" (P19, Kelly, Senior Researcher, Market research company).

Complement existing methods. Marketing researchers explained that they can use digital technology to complement existing methods and, through this, cross-sell additional research products to their clients. The belief that digital tools can expose novel insights, combined with clients' beliefs in their speed and low cost, means that clients may be willing to utilize digital technology in the early stages of traditional projects. For example, prior to interviewing consumers, digital tools can be used to gather rich experiential data that are used to "drive" the interviews. Such digital elicitation techniques can allow researchers to unlock new insights within more traditional data-gathering tools.

Incentives and flexible participation. According to marketing researchers, the ability to design more involving and less intrusive studies provides benefits for participants. Market researchers explain that they can design gamified, flexible tasks using digital data-gathering tools that incentivize participants beyond financial rewards. Digital data-gathering tools allow participants more freedom to reflect their experiences as they can "tap on anytime and capture what's near them" (P14, John, Researcher, Market research company).

Project constraints. Marketing researchers observed that the potential benefits of digital technology can contradict each other. For example, the ability to deliver *new insights* through digital technology can be restricted by a desire to capture *large samples*. One reason for this is that clients impose traditional time and cost constraints on researchers. For example, one interviewee describes how they have "so much data . . . often there's just not enough people to look at it. So you just look at the stuff you can look at. I mean, there's so much more that we could do if we had more people, we had more money . . . You know, there's just not enough manpower to look at it" (P19, Kelly, Senior Researcher, Market research company).

Inflexible design. Traditional methods, especially traditional qualitative methods, leave scope for researchers to shape projects on the fly. In contrast, digital tools often require researchers to fully design and "script" tasks before any data gathering can take place. This means that some of the choices typically taken during the data-gathering stage in response to project feedback must be incorporated into the planning phase. Here, researchers do not necessarily have the same level of information to draw on. Thus, the design of digital projects can be riskier and less responsive.

Data gathering

The dominant benefits and challenges of digital technology perceived by marketing researchers in the data-gathering stage come from the fact they can interrogate digital data as they gather it. This allows them to continuously report findings to their clients and allows them to manage their participants during the data-gathering phase. However, it also means that researchers experience stress and uncertainty in conducting digital research.

Continuous findings and project evaluation. Digital tools allow researchers to analyze and report findings within the data-gathering stage. This is a main benefit marketing researchers perceive for their clients. A researcher explained that "it's more desirable" for clients "to create toplines and create nice summaries that you can send out" throughout the data-gathering process (P20, Penelope, Internal Broker, Multimedia company, Client). Digital tools can automate analysis, allowing them to provide insight during data gathering. But researchers also manually analyze data continuously to deal with large samples efficiently. Katherine (P16), a Junior Researcher, explains,

> I would log on you know two or three times a day, first thing in the morning and then a couple of times in the afternoon, and then log on in my home computer, so I'm moving as they are moving, so I am moving as their story is moving, so I am up to date, so I'm getting a really good picture of the types of people they are, so it's not as if all of a sudden I'm faced with having to look at 500 pictures, because it's a slow everyday process.

Closer to the client. The ability to report findings throughout the data-gathering stage means that researchers can evaluate the success of a project in real time. Research thus becomes a dialogue with clients. This, in turn, allows researchers to build deep relationships with their clients. For example, Iain (P1), an Innovation Manager at a market and design agency (Market research), explained that he could get "senior stakeholders who might not have a day-to-day involvement in the project" engaged by flagging up findings throughout the process. He described how he would send "emails to them saying, 'You know, we found these really interesting things today' to get them onboard." This means that a research project "stays on their radar" of senior stakeholders in client organizations (P20, Penelope, Internal Broker, Multimedia company, Client).

Participant monitoring and management. Digital technologies allow marketing researchers to monitor and evaluate participants in their studies. They provide researchers with new ways to prompt participants and reduce dropout rates. Lisanne (P18, Field Executive, Market research company) described how a respondent went "AWOL" and the carefully negotiated interaction that followed with the respondent to get them to continue with their participation. She identified this problem through a digital tool that highlights which participant "needs to be called because they've only opened their email or they've not looked at their email."

Convenience. Digital data-gathering alleviates some of the traditional demands placed on participants. For example, digital tools can be used for longitudinal research without requiring consumers to store or remember previous responses. These can be stored and presented back to consumers when they need them. As Kelly (P19, Senior Researcher, Market research company) explained, "It gets around memory issues and things like that. People have a bit of space and time in their own natural environment to think about things and respond without the pressure of a group environment . . . there's those two benefits I think."

Lack of control. Digital data-gathering tools change the relationship between researchers and respondents in a way that is not always beneficial. Katherine (P16, Junior Researcher, Market research company) described her loss of control when gathering data. She explained, "I mean it's like group discussion, you rely on people turning up but you know, say, if I've recruited eight people and only four turn up you are still going to be able to do a (focus) group and you're still going to be able to make it work." In contrast, when using digital data-gathering tools, she relies on participants. She described digital projects as being more stressful than traditional methods as a result: "If it's a project that's happening over the weekend you get a dreaded feeling. Okay, well I've set it up and I've spoken to everyone. I have told everyone I need the results back on Monday and then there is that fear that you are not going to get it because you—with the methodology like that you rely so heavily on the respondent to actually do it." Equally, digital tools can encourage data gatherers to doubt the validity of their data and the integrity of their participants. Katherine (P16) described how she had been forced to confront "respondents who were just blatantly lying." She concluded that the digital "methodology is brilliant but from the research point of view it can be a bit like 'ugh, I've really got to project manage that!'." Another researcher explained that they had learned that it is impossible to predict the quantity of data that will be gathered by digital tools. Trevor (P23), a Researcher at a Strategic research consultancy, explained,

> It gives you a—a kind of unknown quantity, the dataset you're going to get back, it's always an unknown quantity. You, you're either going to get too much, you're going to get too little, you rarely get exactly the amount you really [need], you know.

Confusion and continuous monitoring. Market researchers believe that digital technologies can cause confusion for research participants. Many participants come to projects with expectations about what they will be asked to do. New methods can be

> quite a weird concept for them. Quite often they would say, "Well I don't really understand what you want me to do." And even if you explain to them over and over again it's just quite strange to say, you know, "Take a picture of anything that makes you think of this, or makes you think of that." (P16, Katherine, Junior Researcher, Market research company)

Therefore, researchers have to do additional work training respondents. This can involve sending out information packs, having conversations, and making telephone calls. In other words, data gathering often involves face-to-face interactions between researchers and participants.

Analysis

The main benefits and challenges of digital tools during the analysis stage of research come from the distance they introduce between researchers and the data. Digital tools are often designed to allow analysis by people who were not involved in the data-gathering process. They open up a wide scope of possible interpretations. To narrow them down to key findings, researchers may rely on automated analysis or interpretations offered by those who gather data—or even prompts from their clients.

Synchronous and automated. Digital data can be shared and analyzed by different teams in different locations at the same time for different purposes. This allows for efficiencies in analysis, as a single team of experts can analyze data gathered from a variety of different contexts. Trevor (P23), a Researcher at a Strategic research consultancy, explained that they work around "a central point" which manages, moderates, analyzes, and writes up results for projects using "a fairly big sample of very qualitative information from lots of different markets." Although "everyone would have access to that data," this allows the analysis to be conducted "by one or two people."

Scope of interpretation. Digital data can be rich and unstructured. Lain (P1, Innovation Manager, Market and design agency) explains, "You generate lots of really rich data, and I think, more and more our—our clients are asking us for video, asking for photographs, that start to bring things to life within the business in a slightly more, kind of, a slightly more visual way." However, such rich data must be interpreted, it cannot simply be reported like traditional quantitative findings. Choosing how to reduce large datasets and which examples to illustrate gives researchers more choices to make the data relevant for their clients but also introduces uncertainty concerning how best to present findings.

Partial analysis. Researchers described themselves "drowning" in data from digital tools. They explained that it is difficult to limit the scope of analysis. Simon (P15), a Senior Researcher at a market research agency, explained that "the problem with all the digital stuff is the amount of data is exponentially bigger and it's more like a mesh of information rather than like a linear thing, so it's like, how do you do stuff with that!?" One response is to see which interpretations resonate with clients during the data-gathering stage. In these instances, researchers may find that clients pressure them to focus on particular respondents or themes in the data as they continue with the data gathering.

Distance from raw data. Researchers explained that, to reduce a large dataset of rich and unstructured data down to a single key finding, they often rely on interpretations rather than data. That is, they ask junior researchers or field teams to reduce the dataset for them and provide explanations and analysis. Dan (P7), a Project Manager at a marketing and branding corporate, describes a project in which

> the researcher didn't have, physically, the time to go through all of them (over 1,000 images) and select. Basically, they asked me, "Can you select just like randomly twenty images so we can put them into the presentation?" . . . I also gave them the feedback, so they could quote some of the responses on the questions.

Here, digital tools introduce a wedge between data and analysis.

Reporting

For marketing researchers, the main benefits of digital technology in the reporting stage is that they can bring the consumer to life for their clients. This allows them to offer new insights. However, their ability to exploit this benefit of data can be constrained by the expectations of clients.

Access to rich unstructured data. The main benefit researchers see for clients is that they get to access new insights on their consumers. One respondent explained that their clients

> get really excited when we start to bring respondents to life, because although, you know, they might be working in consumer insight or marketing, very often their engagement with their everyday consumers, it's—is very little, far and few between, so they get—they do get really excited when they start to hear real people give real opinions. (P1, Lain, Innovation Manager, Market and design agency SME, Market research).

Distilling data. Although marketing researchers believe that the rich nature of digital data is one of the primary benefits for clients, they explained how this also presents them with a challenge as many clients constrain how they can report their findings. For example, many clients expect findings to be reported in a "deck"—a PowerPoint presentation. These follow a standard template: "This is basically all preamble and explanation about what we've done, and the analysis, and how we got there . . . even though there's a lot of slides, there's not very much on the slides" (P2, Robert, Narrator, Strategic brand consultancy, Market research). This means that researchers have to find ways to reduce digital data into a format that can be presented in a deck. For example, although they might collect and analyze hundreds of videos or images, they will only include "a couple of images, some quotes, word cloud . . . some of the current open ends, some charts, more traditional charts, but just the biggest salient points" (P2, Robert, Narrator, Strategic brand consultancy, Market research). Robert also explained that it "takes a hell of a lot of time to get down to, what, 6 or 7 slides, because we've got so much information."

Ownership and control. According to marketing researchers, clients often want to use digital data for other purposes than the projects they are working on. This creates issues in terms of ownership and control. One researcher explained that they have a "transparent" consent form that sets out

> why we're getting them to take all these pictures, and what we're going to do with them . . . Sometimes we've been in a position where clients loved what they've seen so much that they wanted to go and do something else with it, and then in that instance we'd have to go back to the participants. (P17, Tania, Field team, Market research company, Market research).

This has ethical considerations too. Tania explains,

> We're collecting so much personal data—of people's images, of people's families and God knows what. Before you then go and hand that over to your client, or present it somewhere, what are the steps that we've taken to protect that information? Either for our benefit or mainly for our respondents' benefit.

Analysis: the changing roles in marketing researchers

Researchers described how their roles in market research were changing in response to digital technology. Broadly speaking, current practices are set up around clearly defined roles and duties. No matter which area of marketing researchers work in, all interviewees described their activities
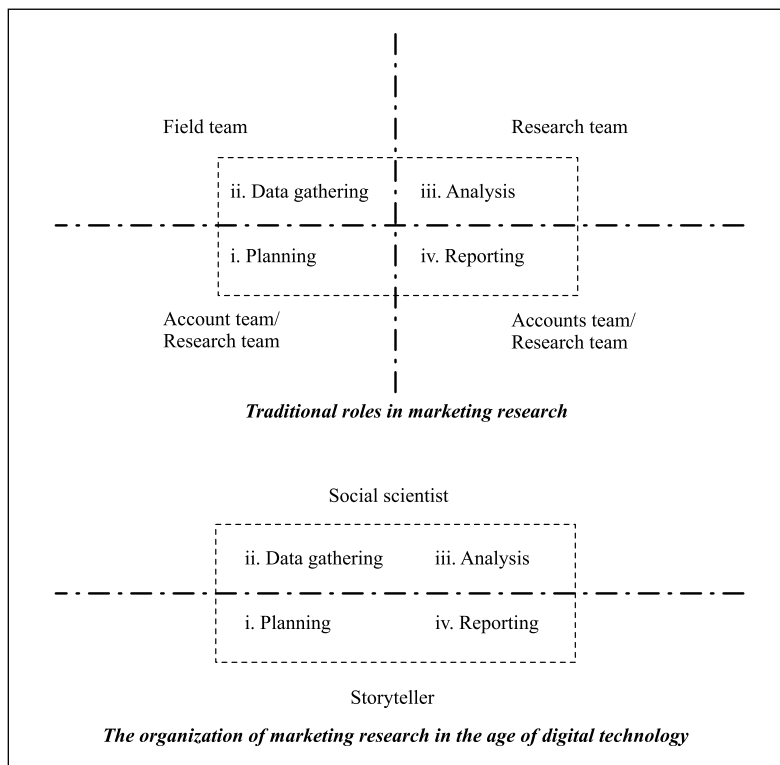
Figure 1. Changing role of the marketing researcher in the age of digital technology.

within a similar organizational arrangement. Traditional projects progress through four stages conducted by a *project team*: planning, data gathering, analysis, and reporting. Project teams are made up from three different functional teams: *accounts, field*, and *research*. Within project teams and functional teams, work is further divided by seniority and specialism. Junior executives and senior directors have different responsibilities, as do quantitative and qualitative research specialists. These divisions are changing and are represented in Figure 1.

Traditional roles in marketing research

Once a project has been won, dialogue begins between account team and research team around a planning phase. The account team manages a research agency's relationships with its customers. They promote their research products, identify opportunities for bespoke research projects, and respond to client briefs. In designing research projects to sell to clients, the account team works with the research team. They provide technical expertise in qualitative and quantitative research. Once commissioned, a project is then passed to the field team. They gather data following the proposal or brief agreed with the client. Although they may liaise with a research team, providing regular updates on the status of a project, once the project has started, the field team works in relative isolation from other teams. Once the data gathering has been completed, the field team passes data on to the research team for analysis. The research team then works with the client team to present and shape the data for the clients in a way that adds value to their relationship.

The organization of project teams through three functional teams has a number of acknowledged benefits. First, it means that data gathering is conducted independently from client relations. Second, it allows researchers to develop expertise and—in this sense—supports career progression. Finally, it provides research organizations with a level of control over the process—as no one individual has too much influence or responsibility.

Within each phase of research, interviewees report that their activities are divided by methodology. All respondents referred to "qual" practitioners who design, conduct, and analyze qualitative research projects such as focus groups, interviews, and consumer ethnography. In contrast, "quant" researchers design, conduct, and analyze quantitative research including structured surveys, experiments and econometrics. In traditional research, these methodologies are treated as specialisms and "were *completely separate*" (P7, Dan, Project Manager, Marketing and branding corporate, Market research). They are housed in different offices and teams and, traditionally, would rarely come into contact with researchers from other methodologies. Historically, most research was conducted within a quantitative paradigm. Qualitative research is either used to drive quantitative studies or for specific bespoke projects. As a result, some respondents reported that there have traditionally been fewer jobs for qualitative researchers, and those that prosper tend to achieve positions of seniority.

Indeed, traditional market research careers involve progression within a team. In the field team, researchers start as Field Executives, then move to become Senior Field Executives before finally taking on the role of Project Manager; in other words, being close to the data and then moving to take on more responsibility for the smooth running of the research as a project. As one respondent explained, in the field team, "it's not going to be the senior managers that are going to do it, they are not going to spend hours chasing people up, it's more of a junior role to do that" (P16, Katherine, Junior Researcher, Market research company).

Katherine goes on to say that, in a research team, "there's always a bit of a difference between the most senior person on a project and the most junior person on a project." Here, seniority determines how close a researcher can get to the data. Junior research executives have responsibility for "checking [data] day in, day out" (P1, Lain, Innovation Manager, Market and design agency SME, Market research). More senior research directors take a holistic view of the data.

The organization of marketing research in the age of digital technology

The adoption of digital technology presents challenges to many of these traditional arrangements. Participants acknowledged that, to derive the benefits of digital technologies, they are finding it necessary to change the organization of project teams, integrate methodologies, and shift responsibilities among levels of seniority.

Blending field, research, and account functions. Many of the benefits that come from digital data blur the functional divisions among project teams. To deliver *continuous findings and project evaluation*, field executives now explicitly conduct analysis because they are "saturated" in the data through *participant management* (P25, Corinne, Researcher, Global market research company). Through this, they limit the *scope of interpretation*. This combines field and research duties and is illustrated by a marketing researcher who—having previously been an Account Manager—now has the job title of Narrator. This new role involves many tasks traditionally conducted by Account Managers combined with more direct research responsibilities. The researcher describes her job as "writing proposals and coming up with designs, to writing scripts, and then obviously checking scripts, running between fieldwork, and then predominantly more, the analysis on the back end of reporting, and debriefing" (P2, Robert, Narrator, Strategic brand consultancy, Market research). In combining these roles, there is an emphasis on storytelling, she does not "really manage an account in the same way" as she did in the past but provides her

clients with a "narrative . . . it's more about talking about the back end and—and that's where the things like the photos and the videos come in, because it's much more, it's more than just numbers."

Integration of methodologies. Whether they want to access *larger samples, utilize novel methods, complement existing methods*, or derive *new insights*, clients expect to be given access to *rich unstructured data* that bring consumers to life. Dan (P7, Project Manager, Marketing and branding corporate, Market research) explained,

> They kind of want a solution and most of the time the solution is not only quant, and it's not only qual. So, we'll give them the best solution if we work together, and they're not really interested if, "Oh is it only a quant?" It's basically, we're giving the final results using both outputs from both methodologies.

This means that the traditional balance between qualitative and quantitative is being re-established.

Surprisingly, researchers observe that this is putting more demands on their interpretative skills than on their computational skills. Presenting rich data involves "more than just numbers . . . it's qualitative" (P2, Robert, Narrator, Strategic brand consultancy, Market research). Yet, traditional research agencies have more quantitative researchers. As one researcher reflected, they have "very, very senior qual people" but lack "more junior people for qual" (P7, Dan). This is leading their agency to hire more junior qaul people and retrain "quant" people. They "have 'pioneers' within each quant team, who go to focus groups or just try and do some interviews as well, or at least try and go and see how the process is going" (P7, Dan). In this regard, quantitative researchers find themselves "working along with qual every day, more and a more" as their agency is explicitly integrating qualitative and quantitative researchers. The two specialisms now sit together in mixed methods teams.

Shifting responsibilities among levels of seniority. With the adoption of digital data, many of the jobs previously executed by juniors and senior researchers are being redistributed. Traditionally, research executives would analyze data and research directors would interpret for their clients in conversation with Accounts. But the desire to produce *large samples of rich and unstructured data* can generate too much data for research executives to analyze. Rather, they have to make choices that can direct the analysis—something more akin to traditional interpretation. For example, researchers described how they would reduce large collections of photos down before handing a selection to more senior analysts. In this case, the choices the junior makes have the ability to limit the *scope of interpretation*. Similarly, the desire to produce continuous findings and keep in close contact with clients, means that junior field executives are being asked to conduct research and interpretation—such as reducing the data down to a single topline finding. These choices, again, would traditionally be made by a senior researcher. As one Project Engager working in the field team explains, although their role focuses on the "operation side" of a project, they are

> starting to get involved in the research side of the projects as well so I started to analyze the stuff, working on, looking at the data and, and doing topline reports, so—so although predominantly I'm from operations, I'm starting to do, step-by-step, the research side of it as well. (P3, Rachel, Project Engager, Strategic brand consultancy, Market research)

Discussion: the market researcher as "social scientist" and "storyteller"

This study has explored the benefits and challenges of digital technology for marketing research as perceived by marketing researchers themselves. The existing theorization of marketing research

suggests that such technology has the potential to radically change marketing practice. However, it has been suggested that skills shortages, organizational cultures, and marketing researchers' professional identities have restricted this impact.

This study develops this area by offering a framework to make sense of marketing research practice and shows how the industry is developing new ways of working and new professional identities for marketing researchers in the age of digital technology. The study focuses specifically on the ways that marketing researchers perceive digital tools designed to be used within primary marketing research. As such, it differs from many existing studies which either focus on or combine these tools with passive data sources such as social network and transactional data.

An immediate finding from the study is the extent that marketing researchers perceive digital research tools as a unique set of technologies and techniques. Our analyses has found that marketing researchers believe the main benefit of digital tools to be their ability to explore new insights and report findings to clients. They can add value to clients by bringing consumers to life and engage them more closely in research projects.

But these benefits are not as straightforward as we might think. Although these tools are, unlike social network and transactional data, specifically designed to support marketing research work, utilizing them is challenging. They come at a cost. They create new tasks that did not exist in traditional research. They cause new anxieties and introduce new risks for research projects. Most profoundly, they require researchers to change how they work together. The benefits demand that researchers involved in data-gathering increasingly engage in analysis as well; they demand that junior, rather than senior, researchers shape interpretations; that quants and qual are combined, and they demand clients have more of an active role throughout the research process.

One way to frame these changes is to think about marketing research in a new way. Rather than observe the division between functional teams, each of whom has responsibility for specific stages in the research process, two new roles for researchers are emerging. First, some researchers are responsible for collecting and analyzing data on a continuous basis. This role is similar to the traditional *social scientist* or *ethnographer* even if the data is highly quantitative. Through gathering the data these researchers interact with participants on a daily basis to guide them through tasks and ensure their engagement in the research. They become ingrained in the data and become immersed in the experiences of participants. They know the data better than anyone else. Second, there are researchers who are responsible for managing clients' relationships and shaping research findings to inspire, engage, and excite clients. They act more like *strategic consultants*. They narrate research, meaning their role is more like a journalist's or *storyteller's*.

These new roles may help researchers to exploit the benefits of digital technology and deal with some of the challenges it presents. However, they present practical challenges for an industry that participants perceive as being starkly divided between qual and quant. How can marketing research be reorganized around these new roles? Indeed, organizationally, we have seen that the traditional structural division of market research by research methodology has created complications for the adoption of digital tools in primary data marketing research. Might the division of marketing research in the future, in terms of storytellers and social scientists, similarly constrain practitioners?

An alternative view may suggest that the marketing researcher of the future will need to specialize in both understanding digital tools and digital data *and* interpreting and delivering insights from them. This would require current practitioner perspectives to shift further and the division between social scientists and storytellers to dissolve.

However, participants in the study describe the costs of this approach. For example, this combination of data gathering and analysis, and the continuous reporting to clients, marks a significant change from traditional ways of working. Here, gathering and analysis were seen as two distinct jobs to ensure that data were collected objectively without direct contact from clients. Issues of bias

and impartiality may arise. Likewise, for research agencies, the new roles give individual researchers more exposure to clients and more power to build tacit knowledge, networks, and contacts. This might create a rebalancing of the psychological contract between researchers and their agencies. If a single individual has too much power, their employer could be held to ransom should they wish to leave, taking clients with them. We see similar relationships in the advertising sector, where successful agents often leave large agencies to set up as independents, taking clients with them.

Perhaps, the most surprising finding here is the prominent role for interpretation in the age of digital data. It appears that many of the challenges researchers face do not come from a lack of technical skills or quantitative capacity. Rather, marketing researchers feel as though they have not yet been able to update more traditional interpretative skills to make the most of the digital data sources they can access. Individual marketing researchers need to recognize that working successfully in the age of digital data does not mean that they need to be computer programmers. It might mean, for example, that they need to learn how to use semiotics, psychoanalysis, laddering and so on to analyze online images. Future research should explore these issues and investigate how clients, researchers, and agencies are working with them.

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ORCID iD

Robert Cluley iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0827-4538

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