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The Quantum Mechanics of Brand:

What You See – and Don't See – with Derived Importance Analysis

By Susan Schwartz McDonald, PhD and Michael Polster, PhD

Derived importance is a hammer that, if aimed wrong, can hit not the nail, but the fingernail. This piece discusses the assumptions and the limitations of derived importance in order to help market researchers and marketers make thoughtful decisions about whether and when to rely on them. Our focus is particularly on “professional purchase decisions”, but most of the points made here have application for consumer products research as well.

In an effort to gain competitive advantage, market researchers deploy a variety of tools to detect attributes and customer impressions that differentiate brands and drive product selection. Those nuances sometimes reside at a level we like to call “quantum brand mechanics,” where the subtlest of distinctions and motivations reside. Understanding the invisible force fields that draw customers to products can be the key to success—especially in markets where product differentiation is slight and the competition fierce. But despite billions spent annually to uncover drivers of behavior, the industry continues to struggle with a fundamental paradox: our need to rely on customers to explain themselves—and our deep doubts about whether they are reliable reporters.

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