

# Case Studies in Management Science Research for Digitalization and Sustainability Development

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**Abstract.** This paper offers a thorough examination of case studies within the realm of management science research, specifically concentrating on the intersecting themes of digitalization and sustainability. Emphasizing case studies as a central research methodology, it underscores their effectiveness in exploring nuanced aspects of management, especially in light of contemporary challenges posed by digitalization and sustainability. The article highlights the significance of case studies in uncovering the intricate dynamics of digitalization and sustainability within organizational frameworks. It explores how these studies yield insights into the integration of digital technologies, the optimization of sustainable practices, and the complex interplay between the two. Additionally, it underscores the capacity of case studies to provide valuable empirical evidence, fostering a contextualized understanding of how organizations navigate the complexities associated with digital transformation while prioritizing sustainability goals. In conclusion, the paper advocates for the continual exploration and application of case studies as a robust methodology in management science research. It argues that case studies offer a holistic and practical approach to examining the intricate relationship between digitalization and sustainability, contributing to a nuanced understanding of management practices in the evolving landscape of contemporary business environments.

## 1 Introduction

In the context of digitalization and sustainability, management is viewed as a practical activity involving purposeful actions aimed at changing existing economic and social realities. The primary function of management science, particularly relevant in the digital era, is the projection function—providing insights on how to enhance the management process. The intersection of scientific research and practical activities is especially apparent in non-routinized engineering activities, often incorporating scientific characteristics, such as implementing research results into practical applications [1].

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Unlike many sciences with distinct cognitive methods, management methodology lacks a permanent, universal character. Instead, it draws on methods from other sciences like psychology, sociology, statistics, econometrics, and economics. The evolution of management methodology reflects changes in management methods over time, offering insights into an organization's current state. The field continually incorporates new methods characterized by varying cognitive and practical effectiveness, often driven by environmental changes and the demand for sophisticated tools [2-5].

Historically, four fundamental types of methods—pragmatic, empirical, formal, and understanding—have shaped management science. Despite occasional contradictions and divergent results, management methodology aims to balance utilitarian and practical objectives, relying on methodologies from natural and social sciences [6].

In turn, in the dynamic landscape of contemporary business environments marked by digitalization and a growing emphasis on sustainability, the role of case studies in management science research has become increasingly crucial. Many authors [7-75] explored the profound impact of case studies in unraveling the complexities associated with the intersection of digitalization and sustainability, shedding light on their significance in advancing knowledge and informing management practices.

As organizations navigate the digital era and strive for sustainable development, case studies emerge as invaluable tools for delving into the nuanced challenges and opportunities inherent in this evolving landscape. Case studies provide a unique vantage point to investigate how organizations grapple with the integration of digital technologies while adhering to sustainability goals [7-38]. They offer an in-depth understanding of the strategies, processes, and outcomes associated with this dual imperative, unraveling the intricate interplay between digital transformation and sustainable practices [39-75].

Case studies bring methodological rigor to management science research, offering a holistic view of complex phenomena. They facilitate the exploration of pragmatic solutions by presenting a contextualized understanding of management practices, combining utilitarian and practical objectives to address the intricate relationship between digitalization and sustainability.

While recognizing the benefits, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges and limitations associated with case studies. Issues such as generalizability and potential biases should be considered, emphasizing the importance of a nuanced and balanced approach in leveraging case studies as a research methodology.

The impact of case studies in management science research on digitalization and sustainability development is profound. These studies serve as windows into real-world scenarios, offering invaluable insights that contribute to a nuanced comprehension of management practices in the evolving landscape of contemporary business environments. As organizations continue to grapple with the challenges of digitalization and strive for sustainable development, case studies remain an indispensable tool for researchers and practitioners alike, fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between these two transformative forces.

The contemporary relevance of case studies in developing management science is emphasized, citing notable contributions from scholars like H. Fayol, K. Adamiecki, A. Sloan, H. Mintzberg, and others. The contemporary importance of case studies to the development of the discipline of management science is highlighted. As the most widespread achievements in this field, the research of H. Fayol, K. Adamiecki, A. Sloan, and in recent years also the work of A.D. Chandler [76], R.M. Kanter [77], R. Eccles and D. Crane [78], K. Eisenhardt and M. Zbaracki [79] or H. Mintzberg and J. Waters [80]. The use of case studies in published works oscillates at less than one in ten published works, but this level may be misleading, as some studies, e.g. organisational ties [81], ambidexterity of

organisations [82], make significant use of this method. Therefore, the usefulness of case studies in the early identification of a scientific problem is often pointed out.

In the paper, the author emphasises the importance of the case study method in research processes. He emphasises that the usefulness of case studies is limited to a specific type of hypothesis being tested and is gradable, and that their use should rather be a second or third choice of research strategy.

## **2 Applying a Qualitative Approach to Management Science Research**

According to W. Czakon [83], in management science publications, despite the perceived growth, qualitative research is still too seldom used, which is very useful and can provide knowledge that cannot be gained using a quantitative approach.

A set of certain assumptions, also known as paradigms, determines the choice of a particular research approach. According to L. Sułkowski [84] paradigm means a set of concepts and theories commonly accepted by the scientific community of specialists in a particular field.

The relationship between paradigm and methodology is very important. Researchers must use a method that is consistent with the assumptions and objectives of the theoretical views expressed by the author [85].

There are many classifications of paradigms. The division proposed by G. Burrell and G. Morgan [86] is referred to by many researchers. These authors distinguished four paradigms in the social sciences: functionalism, radical structuralism, interpretative- symbolic paradigm and postmodernism. They adopted the following criteria to distinguish them:

- epistemological assumptions regarding science (objectivism and subjectivism refer to a vision of science that uses either methods that enable objectively existing elements of reality to be identified and described, or methods that enable the elements of reality to be understood and assessed),

- perfectionist social orientation (regulation or radical change refers to the ideal of science chosen by the researcher - a passive description of reality or integration into reality that leads to change).

In turn, R. Gephart [8385, 87] made a distinction between positivism and post-positivism (positivism and post-positivism take into account not only assumptions about the reality under study, but also the aim and objectives of the research, the unit of analysis and the emphasis of the methods used), interpretative research (understanding the meaning) and critical postmodernism (pointing out contradictions and inequalities).

L. Sułkowski [88] made a synthetic division into so-called paradigms [89]:

- dominant in science (includes functionalism, neo-positivism and systems theory) - researchers look for recurring causal relationships that occur between the components of the reality under study. The main aim is to generalise, verify the assumptions made, including hypotheses, analyse and forecast change. The researcher adopts the position of the so-called outsider, i.e. an external subject, for whom the reality under study has an objective character, existing independently of the researcher;

- alternative (i.e. interpretivism and the critical current) - researchers focus on analysing not only recurrent, but also unique/contextual relationships between the components of the studied reality. The aim is not so much to generalise or verify, but more to understand, describe, synthesise and indicate changes in the studied reality. The researcher is treated as a participant in the analysed processes, the so-called insider, and is therefore aware that he or she is part of this reality and adopts an axiological (valuing) stance.

Given the paradigm adopted by the researcher, the research methods used should be adapted to it. Thus, the choice of quantitative or qualitative approach first depends on the research problem posed by the researcher, then on the paradigm adopted [89, 90].

- J. Suddaby [91] argues that new developments are always the result of expectations of an unknown theory and it is qualitative research that serves, among other things, to build theory. However, it should be noted that there is still a misunderstanding as to what this research actually is. According to Van Maanen [92] qualitative research is difficult to define, given its flexibility, as it is often designed at the same time as its implementation. Qualitative research addresses questions about the creation of social experience and the meaning that is given to it by social actors in order to better understand it [85, 93]. They are therefore explanatory rather than conclusive [94].

M.E. Graebner, J.A. Martin and P.T. Roundy [95] identify five key rationales for using qualitative research and these include:

- the construction of a new theory (when the theory explaining the phenomenon in question does not exist, or is insufficiently developed or has certain deficiencies),
- capturing the subjects' lived experiences in their natural environment and interpreting these experiences,
  - a full, holistic understanding of the processes under study (may result in theory testing),
  - an illustration of some abstract idea, derived solely from theory (illustration makes the research credible and convincing to the reader),
- the study of narratives, discourse or other linguistic phenomena (the subjects of the research may include statements collected during face-to-face interviews, as well as media statements, reports, websites, etc.).

Clarity of the essence of qualitative research can also be achieved by comparing it with quantitative research [89, 96].

The first difference is related to attribution to the paradigm in management science adopted by the researcher, i.e. the way in which the phenomena under study are understood and the belief that they can be influenced [88, 97].

Another difference is the stated research objective. The qualitative researcher mainly pursues the goal of building or refining theory and testing it. In quantitative research, on the other hand, the aim is to verify existing theory, most often by testing accepted hypotheses [89, 98]. Furthermore, qualitative research, by focusing attention on socially constructed reality, requires knowledge of the context of the phenomena being analysed - in contrast to quantitative research [99].

The fourth difference is the importance of context in qualitative research and quantitative research - it is related to the role of the researcher. In qualitative research, according to A. Strauss, J. Corbin [100] the personality, experience and character of the researcher become important components of the research process and should be an explicit part of the analysis. In contrast, in quantitative research, the researcher does not influence the cognitive results achieved, as he or she investigates reality in an objective manner, devoid of axiological valuation and interpretation of the subjects themselves [89, 101].

Qualitative research is based on text (words, conversations, etc.) and images to give meaning to concepts - it is literary and humanistic in nature [102]. Quantitative research, on the other hand, counts and measures phenomena to give them meaning - it is grounded in mathematical and statistical knowledge [85, 103].

A sixth difference concerns the presentation of a compelling story. This applies to both qualitative and quantitative research, however, it should be emphasised that for the first type of research the story is crucial. For qualitative research, as K.G. Corley and D.A. Gioia [104], besides the scientific contribution, the discovery of new aspects of the reality analysed is particularly important, as the research should intrigue and inspire the reader [89,105].

Data and qualitative variables have specific characteristics that offer potential advantages over data and quantitative variables. It should be noted that qualitative data are highly malleable, which activates cognitive processes [106] and rich and detailed, which offers the opportunity to show nuances or details often overlooked in quantitative studies [89, 107].

The eighth difference comes down to the research procedure. In quantitative research, it is strict and specific - the researcher relies on accepted data sets and statistical tests and follows accepted research procedures. In qualitative research, on the other hand, their cyclical nature (iterative) becomes crucial, hence it is difficult to have one universally accepted research procedure [89,108].

Due to the different purpose of quantitative and qualitative research, the two approaches require a different presentation - in terms of text structure and in terms of graphic presentation. Regarding the structure of the text - in qualitative research, especially based on grounded theory methodology, the structure of the text may be atypical (introduction, research results, formulation of new theory/hypotheses, etc. against the background of existing knowledge included in the literature, conclusion). In quantitative research, on the other hand, theory is often presented at the beginning of the paper (to develop hypotheses that are further tested on this basis), while empirical research is presented later in the paper. The differences that apply to the structure of the text also apply to the discussion and conclusion sections. In qualitative papers, the discussion section should be exhaustive - it should not just summarise the results and present theoretical as well as practical implications, as in quantitative papers. In addition, often in qualitative research the discussion section is not distinguished because the strong link between empirical data and theory makes it difficult to distinguish different narratives within the 'research results' section. The conclusion in papers based on qualitative research is relatively elaborate - the opposite is the case for papers based on quantitative research (the conclusion is relatively synthetic and short) [89, 109].

When presented graphically, qualitative data, unlike quantitative data, cannot be simply synthesised or reduced to tables or graphs. Qualitative researchers should think creatively about showing their results [89, 110].

The generalised research procedure for qualitative research consists of the following phases [89, 111]:

- 1)The initial phase includes:
  - a) Formulation of the research problem.
  - b) Review of the literature on the subject.
  - c) Defining the research sample.
  - d) Selection and preparation of research tools.
  - e) Pilot field studies.
  - f) Modifications (if necessary) of research tools.
- 2)Phase I - Proper research and analysis of the material during fieldwork includes:
  - a) Field research.
  - b) Analysing the data during the research, keeping notes and at the same time (if necessary) further modifying the research tools.
- 3)Phase II - Analysis of the material after the field survey includes:
  - a) Analysis of documents, notes and any other material collected during the fieldwork.
  - b) Transcription of interviews.
  - c) Coding interview data.
  - d) Interpretation of the content of the interviews and other materials collected.
  - e) Possible return to the field and consultation of results with respondents.
  - f) Possible interpretation of the material collected.
- 4)Phase III - Development of research results includes:
  - a) Formulation of research conclusions for theory and practice.

b) Preparation of a publication (research report).

5) Final phase - Submission of the study for review and presentation of its final form includes:

a) Taking into account the reviewers' comments and revisiting the concept and conclusions of the study. If necessary - return to the field for additional research.

b) Presentation of successive versions of the study, modifications.

c) Final version of the publication (research report).

Given the difficulty of conducting qualitative research, any researcher who has attempted this type of research at least once should ask themselves whether this is the path for them [112].

### **3 Case Studies in the Research Process**

Case study research involves an in-depth analysis of phenomena and processes in their actual setting [113]. It does not serve to test theories, except to falsify existing hypotheses, but contributes to a better understanding of the object of study [113, 114]. The essence of using a case study is not to obtain universal regularities, but to anticipate the impact of the environment and the circumstances of a given circumstance on the shape of the results obtained. The contextuality of the case study has consequences [115]:

- procedural, because the researcher does not know the impact of the circumstances when he or she enters the study, making the case study procedure repetitive,

- cognitive, because the knowledge gained is situational - a given situation may not be repeated,

- tools, as research requires consideration not only of the research object, but also of its environment and the impact of that environment on the object being analysed.

The essence of a case study is determined by the use of exploratory methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under analysis. The size or given characteristics of the object are not important here, as the research object can be either a single decision [116], a process [117], a cluster [118], or an entire country [119]. In this context, J. Dul and T. Hak [6, 120] even point out that some authors indicate that it is the interpretative methods that determine the essence of the case.

Case studies in management science can be used for three purposes [121]: theory-building, theory-testing, executive research.

Theory-building case studies enable the development of existing theory and understand the course of processes over time, or provide explanations for hitherto unrecognised phenomena. Their use can lead to defining the characteristics of a phenomenon, the relationships between them and the course of phenomena. Theory-building is related to two aspects here: on the one hand, it provides hypotheses for quantitative research; on the other hand, it opens up fields of exploration previously not considered at all or considered differently. Three conditions are indicated here under which there is justification for the use of the case study method [113,122]:

- an early stage in the development of knowledge in a specific area of research,

- learning about a current phenomenon in real-life circumstances,

- unclear boundaries between the phenomenon and the conditions for its occurrence.

All of these circumstances clearly highlight the shortcomings of theoretical clarification at the start of the research. Studying cases in such a situation leads to the removal of these deficiencies [113, 123]:

1) when knowledge development in an area is low, i.e. when:

- vague description of the phenomenon or research area has been provided, case studies provide empirical data and an interpretation of the participants in these dynamics,

- the results of empirical studies are contradictory or insufficient, case studies prompt the search for complementary or competing explanations that increase the explanatory power of proposed models,
- there is an incomplete list of determinants or characteristics of the phenomenon under study, case studies complement the knowledge obtained and provide the knowledge needed to make decisions or even conduct further research, or provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study.

2) when the recognition of a contemporary phenomenon in real-life circumstances is legitimate, i.e. when:

- the phenomenon under study is completely new or has dynamics that differ from previous conditions, the usefulness of case studies is related to the timeliness of the phenomenon and its extent,
- there is a multidirectionality and dynamics of interactions, case studies help to understand and explain the causes of a phenomenon,
- there is economic cyclicity and product, technology and organisational life cycles.

3) when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the circumstances of its occurrence are vague, i.e. when there is a problem in precisely identifying the phenomenon under investigation, case study research can be used for in-depth research to complement the research conducted.

Theory testing in the management sciences is captured as the quantitative determination of the validity of a hypothesised relationship between variables using statistical techniques, i.e. to obtain correlation coefficients and consequently confirm the relationships identified in the hypothesis. The primary argument for using case studies to test theory is falsificationism. Falsifying a theory using case studies that contradict it or indicate that the theoretical explanation does not enable an understanding of organisational reality [119, 124]. Another argument proving the usefulness of case studies, relates to the nature of the hypotheses being tested, as testing a theory is really a comparison of hypothesised relationships between variables with the actual behaviour of those variables [113, 125]. Four types of hypotheses are identified [126]:

- the hypothesis presupposing the existence of a necessary condition (it states that in each case the relationship presented by the hypothesis will occur - variable A must appear for phenomenon B to occur) - one case is sufficient to test it,
- the sufficiency-condition hypothesis (states that the occurrence of variable A leads to the occurrence of phenomenon B), for which a single-case study or replication of single cases is sufficient,
- the deterministic relationship hypothesis (means that for each explanatory variable there will in fact be a relationship to the dependent variable as predicted by the hypothesis, the least frequently used in management science), when testing this hypothesis, longitudinal studies or paired case studies are recommended,
- the stochastic relationship hypothesis (contains the assumption that a change in the value of the independent variable will affect a specific change in the dependent variable, the most common type of relationship in management science), for which case studies are not a recommended research strategy.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the usefulness of case studies is limited to the specific type of hypotheses being tested and gradable, and that their use should be a second or third choice of research strategy rather than the first [113, 127].

Executive research, on the other hand, focus more on the preparation of the decision-maker's action than on understanding general regularities. The didactic use of case studies originates from Harvard Business School, where they were first used in the 1920s.



Because they allow students to discuss real-world problems by simulating real-world decision-making problems, they should consist of two elements: (1) a description of the case and (2) a description of the technique for conducting the discussion. This implies, for applied studies, that the following conditions are met: a) definition of the managerial problem that is illustrated by the case, b) definition of the way of studying the case (most often descriptive techniques are used here, allowing to present a description of the conditions and the process of solving the problem in concrete conditions). Thus, it can be concluded that applied studies play an exploratory role, explaining what brings about the desired effect in the given conditions and allowing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and its conditions; on the other hand, they do not provide the possibility to generalise [113, 128].

A research methodology is a general way of dealing with a class of problems, while a research procedure is related to a specific study. The research procedure for conducting a case study is as follows [6, 129]:

- the formulation of a research problem, where ignorance is the starting point of the case study and needs to be confirmed by literature research. Research questions here can be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory, the latter being the most common. The appropriate formulation of a research question should meet two conditions: the first, related to its location in the existing state of knowledge and the second, related to the expected results [6, 130];

- case selection, which is a fundamental stage of case study and on which the whole model, or whole proposals for generalisation, are based. This selection involves the use of specific data sources to ensure the reliability of the research results. Purposive and theoretical case selection are indicated, but mostly purposive selection is used (apart from the use of case studies to test theory) [6, 131]. Purposive selection is described by five criteria: availability of data, vividness of the case, illustrating the extremes but allowing for unambiguous interpretation, the regularities analysed, diversity, concerning the analysis of multiple cases that illustrate diverse or contrasting circumstances, and which, as K. Eisenhardt [132] points out, should be between four and ten cases, a critical phenomenon whose deviation from the accepted standards or extreme course makes it possible to define a generalisation, and a metaphor which directs the researcher to a given course of a particular phenomenon and makes it possible to adopt a given research position. Purposive selection in each case requires justification, which becomes an integral part of the case study and an area for assessing methodological rigour [133];

- the development of data collection tools, where the cyclical nature of the data collection procedure is typical, as well as the diversity of data sources (achieved by triangulation) to ensure the reliability of the research. Qualitative data include, but are not limited to: interview, observation, participant observation, photographs, archival material [113, 134];

- conducting field research to collect primary data. The methodological rigour of case study research obliges the use of a deliberately prepared data collection protocol. Here, however, the researcher is open to unanticipated information, and research methods such as semi-structured interviewing, observation, or participant observation allow the researcher to access the nature of the phenomena and the perception of phenomena by their participants [113, 135];

- analysis of the data collected, which includes both quantitative and qualitative data. With regard to qualitative data, it should be noted that accessing a large amount of low-order data requires structuring at the data collection stage, which can be carried out using one of seven data structuring and analysis techniques (narrative, quantification, multiple patterns, grounded theory, mapping and visualisation, temporal extraction, synthesis). In effect, the aim is to achieve as synthetic a presentation of the wealth of empirical data as possible by emerging a pattern (logical, temporal or spatial) and then analysing it [113, 136];



- the formulation of generalisations, which ranks as the most creative part of the case study and requires the ability to think synthetically, a great deal of intellectual effort and a deep understanding of the problem under analysis [83, 113];
- a confrontation with the literature, the purpose of which is to compare the models or explanations available in the literature with the generalisations arising from the analysis of empirical data and to illustrate the contribution of the study to the development of knowledge, as well as to bear on the credibility and reliability of the research conducted [113];
- study closure - a generalisation that seeks to define sentences that define features, relationships or patterns of event dynamics and takes the form of a so-called proposition. In the event that the researcher considers that these propositions require testing using quantitative methods, he or she should formulate them in the form of hypotheses, which are the basis for future research. Iterations of the individual steps are possible, except for the first and last [113].

## 4 Conclusion

It should be pointed out that case studies, also have some limitations. The first is related to the research objectives to which case studies can be applied. This is because it is common to expect the results of a case study to be confirmed on a collective. Such an allegation, however, stems from a cursory knowledge of the case study procedure.

After all, for some types of hypotheses it is possible to test on individual cases. However, research practice in the management sciences allows the conclusion that case studies usually lead to hypotheses or theories, which are then tested using quantitative methods [113]. The second limitation of case studies concerns qualitative methods. Several criticisms are pointed out in this aspect, including: unsystematic data analysis or failure to meet the criterion of intersubjective testability, but the rigorous conduct of the case study procedure avoids these [113]. The third limitation is related to the case study procedure, as some of its important stages, e.g.: case selection, formulation of generalisations, may narrow the cognitive value of the research results or reduce their reliability [83, 113]. Hence, it is necessary to refer to the criterion of research reliability, the assessment of which, in the case of a case study, can be the same as in the case of qualitative research, i.e. using criteria such as: fidelity, transitivity, robustness and confirmability [83]. It should be noted that despite the existence of criteria for assessing the rigour of case study research, authors using this method in papers published in top-ranked English-language journals between 1995 and 2000, refer to positivist criteria of evaluation, i.e. relevance and reliability [113]. This duality of evaluation of case study research emphasises the need to take into account their specificity, while on the other hand it confirms the concern to spar with the traditional requirements for scientific research [113, 137-140].

Given the aforementioned points, it is essential to acknowledge the pivotal role played by research methods in fostering the development of digitalization and sustainability in economic systems. The current economic landscape is characterized by the transformative forces of digitalization and an escalating emphasis on sustainability. This article delves into the significant role of research methods in management as a facilitator of digitalization and sustainability within economic systems.

As highlighted earlier, research methods in management act as catalysts for progress, offering a structured framework to comprehend, analyze, and address the intricate challenges posed by digitalization and sustainability. Evolving alongside these challenges, these methods become instrumental in shaping strategies that guide economic systems towards innovative and sustainable practices.

The establishment of robust research methods equips us with the knowledge required to navigate the complexities of a swiftly digitizing world and achieve sustainable economic

development. Contributions from empirical research, case studies, and interdisciplinary approaches form a comprehensive knowledge base, aiding policymakers and businesses in making well-informed decisions.

In the realm of digitalization, research methods facilitate the examination of technological advancements, their impact on business models, and the incorporation of digital tools into management practices. Through rigorous analysis, researchers can discern patterns, forecast trends, and devise strategies to leverage digital capabilities for enhanced efficiency and competitiveness.

Similarly, research methods play a pivotal role in addressing the sustainability of economic systems. Employing methodologies that evaluate environmental, social, and economic aspects, researchers advocate for sustainable business practices, corporate responsibility, and the reduction of environmental footprints.

It is crucial to underscore the interconnected relationship between digitalization and sustainability, urging research methods to explore the synergies between these transformative forces. Understanding how digitalization can nurture sustainable practices and vice versa becomes imperative for holistic economic development.

While recognizing the positive impact of research methods, it is equally important to acknowledge challenges such as data privacy, ethical concerns, and potential biases in methodologies. Adhering to stringent ethical standards ensures that research contributes responsibly to the development of digitalization and sustainability without compromising integrity.

In conclusion, the development of research methods in management stands at the core of promoting the digitalization and sustainability of economic systems. These methods furnish the essential tools to explore, contemplate, and implement strategies that advocate for innovative economic development and environmental stewardship. As we navigate the intricate pathways of the digital age, it is robust research methodologies that can lay the foundation for a sustainable and technologically advanced economic future.

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