

Is Qualitative Research always Exploratory?

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Abstract

In many cases, qualitative methods test the plausibility of potential quantitative approaches. This implies that qualitative research is seen as an 'exploratory' methodology, providing information prior to quantitative methods. This paper aims to argue that this imperfect view of qualitative research fulfilling a support role ought not to be the case. Two examples are given where it has been used outside the exploratory limits. The first example uses a single qualitative method (focus groups) and the second uses a variety of methods (video, depth interview, self-completion diary). These show that good qualitative techniques offer a balance of both inductive and deductive procedures. There is no doubt that qualitative methods will continue to uncover concepts that are not obvious, however we present an opportunity to witness new perspectives for those situations where concealed cues reveal greater insight into a phenomenon.

Introduction

It was once accepted that a single method for market research was the best option – and that choice was either via quantitative (hard) facts or qualitative (soft) meanings with a distinct bias towards the former. Some go so far as to state that "Quantitative methods take marketing from an art to a science, from conjecture to rigor" (Saunders, 1999, p.85). Indeed Zikmund (1997) felt it necessary to "warn" researchers that if they use qualitative methods it could not take place of the more conclusive, quantitative research. This implies that these paradigmatic boundaries have been too hastily relied upon as a source of conjecture rather investigating whether or not the final content could actually be complimentary.

Thankfully, this opposing viewpoint has mellowed over the years, (Gummesson, 2005; Hammersley, 2003) to one where there is some recognition that the benefits are greater when the two methods are combined, so that the binding of the two methodologies, with neither one trumping the other, will produce the utmost outcome. This "pluralism" suggests a balanced undertaking rather than a competitive one (Brannen 2003; Deshpande, 1983; Stafford and Stafford, 1993) thus the implementation of this combination may, in fact, avoid mediocre practice. There is continued debate about whether the focus should be on the philosophy of research or the practice of it, and whilst both positivists and interpretivists have traditionally been seen as conflicting approaches, in practice, it often a combination that will reveal the benefits of drawing one tradition from another (Davies and Fitchett, 2005).

However, more often than not the role of qualitative research, within a market research context, is limited to capturing the key variables which are important for further 'hard' scientific methods (Milliken, 2001). This implies that qualitative research has mostly been positioned as an 'exploratory' methodology, using an inductive procedure as a means to get inside the 'minds' of the customer. This then provides the information as a pre-cursor to the deductive quantitative methods. This viewpoint advocates that qualitative research is simply a 'safe' first step take

before the 'real' research is embarked upon, thus denigrating the potential for qualitative research (Hyde, 2000).

But has qualitative research been unfairly categorized? Is its use limited to being a provider of the required information from which questionnaires, and other such instruments can be designed? This paper aims to argue that this imperfect view of qualitative research fulfilling a support role ought not to be the case and that qualitative research should be recognized in its own right, not just as an 'accompaniment' or forerunner to other research methods. A review of literature focusing on where it hasn't been used for purely exploratory purposes shows very little results when compared to those studies where it was used prior to any hypothesis testing. And for those where it has been used as a follow on from prior quantitative research, it was only to provide an answer to a small anomaly in the data or to provide additional input into further survey based data (Brannen, 2003).

Despite this, the application of qualitative methods within consumer research have become more noticeable in recent years, as there is a desire to not only provide valid statistical measures, but gain profound understanding into the 'why' of the research question (Grace and O'Cass, 2002; Hirschman, 1986; Kates, 1998,). Under certain circumstances, it is possible that qualitative research can be used deductively (Hyde, 2000) and to compliment existing theories rather than just theory generating. This paper will include examples of how this has been done and how it has benefited the overall outcome of the research objectives.

Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives

Historically, emphasis has been placed on quantifying the social sciences in terms of applying statistical generalizations as evidence of true facts. This has put the methods employed to capture this data, in a perceived superior position to that of the less rigid offerings. After all, "quantitative methods were purposely developed for the task of verifying or confirming theories and ... qualitative methods were purposely developed for the task of discovering or generating theories" (Reichardt and Cook, 1979 p.17). However, many of these techniques are limited in their ability to delve into the minds of the customer in terms of the cognitive processes, emotions, unconscious learning and non verbal communication (Zaltman, 1997). Whereas the focal point of qualitative research is to gain depth rather than breadth of understanding and therefore lends itself to uncover the veiled meanings of a phenomenon. This is not to negate the benefits and advantages of quantitative methods because without these, many developments in understanding would not be around today. For example, Ehrenberg (1972) on repeat purchasing, Day (1969) on brand loyalty, and Howard and Sheth (1969) on consumer behaviour, just to name a few. Nor is it a case of one method being used as a replacement for the other. Researchers should accept that each perspective has a set of very different theoretical angles which will adapt to a specific range of conceptualizations of research issues (Brannen, 2003). However there are also occasions where it isn't mandatory to follow the typical 'qualitative → quantitative' process in order to gain the best possible outcome.

From a marketing perspective, often the first question that follows 'What percentage of customers like my brand?' is 'What makes them like it and why?'. Even as a quantitative study may offer a brief solution to this via open-ended questions, a one or two sentence response from

a questionnaire will not provide deep insights as to the real motivations of the informant. There is a common belief that 80% of human communication is non-verbal (Zaltman, 1997) and it is not often that a set of fixed questions (or similar format) will adequately capture these non verbal cues. For example, whilst mechanical observations may count occurrences of behaviour, it does little to explain the underlying driving force behind the actions. Mehrabian (1971) goes so far as to stipulate that only 7% of meaning in a message is communicated verbally, with the remaining 93% being conveyed non verbally. As stated by LeDoux (1996) "We have to be very careful when we use verbal reports based on introspective analyses of one's own mind as scientific data"(p.32)

The following case studies each illustrate a different application of qualitative research, not as a subordinate to quantitative methods, but as an equal.

A Single Method Example: "Student Subject Satisfaction"

A typical case where qualitative methods have been used beyond that of an exploratory role was recently been undertaken within the faculty of a major tertiary institution. As part of a quality monitoring process, generalized student feedback is provided annually across all courses via the use of a self-completion questionnaire. The variables within the questionnaire were selected by means of careful statistical consideration and prior research. The core purpose of the questionnaire was to measure the 'success' of each subject based on the students opinions. Whilst their results were of an acceptable level in most cases, there was no adequate information regarding the students' rationale for their underlying opinions about each course. As is often the case, senior staff could 'guess' what the students were thinking, however they had very little evidence on which to build a case in order to achieve optimum feedback. Accordingly, a purely qualitative study was undertaken in the form of focus groups for each selected course and included a broad range of students to ensure that all stages of each course was represented. The ensuing results reflected key issues which were not necessarily reflected in the survey. An example of this was understanding how important it was for students to learn relevant workplace skills over and above the theory. The focus groups revealed that this was an issue for the students through the following comments -

"The majority of stuff we learn is good in theory but if you don't go out and get experience to back it up its absolutely useless then"

"Most of them [current lecturers] have been at the university for more than ten, fifteen, twenty years and they are not up to scratch. They are stale and that's why they have got to get industry input, to make us better students."

"Those that still have some association with the industry are better lecturers"

The use of qualitative research revealed that the students considered workplace relevance vital to their training, and expected their lecturers to keep up to date with industry standards in order to provide this. Without this additional information, it was assumed that they were generally happy with what was currently being offered, whereas, with further probing it was revealed to have fundamental issues which needed attention. This example shows the use of only one qualitative

method to address the quantitative results beyond that of a preceding exploratory enquiry. It was a case of quantitative output offering the 'status quo' of a situation, however it was the qualitative output that revealed this was not the case. The next example takes it a step further by employing a variety of qualitative methods rather than just relying on one.

A multi-method example: "The Influence of Consumer Emotions for Grocery Products"

Brands all seek loyal patronage for a variety reasons (ie price movement tolerance, less influence to competitive activity, increasing profitability etc). A brand that has been successful in creating a positive relationship is perceived as being low risk and with high credibility. It is with premise in mind that research was undertaken investigating the influence of emotions for brand loyal consumers within grocery. Fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) was the selected industry due to the transient nature of the market especially in terms of brand loyalty and emotional relationships. With low financial costs, and a wide selection of alternatives, it was proposed that the presence of emotional ties to brands would not be immediately obvious. This scenario then, would lend itself to the benefits of qualitative methodologies to uncover any concealed (conscious or otherwise) meanings.

Once an established group of brand loyal buyers were gathered from a random sampled questionnaire, they were divided into two groups. The first one undertook a focus group to highlight the key factors influencing brand choice within FMCG. The focus group method was employed as a confirmatory instrument for existing theories on the role of attitudes on grocery buying rather than generating any new theories. The data from this was then integrated into the second set of participants who were recruited to partake in a video observation of their grocery shopping. This video was then followed by a depth interview at a café of their choice to discuss the reasons behind their brand choice in terms of emotions, motivations and underlying value systems. The informant had the freedom to move the discussion and openly talk about which brands were really important to them, and why.

"My hair went totally dry and that's why I needed to get back to Palmolive even though the Sunsilk isn't finished. I've been using it for about 4 years and I tell everyone I know about it. I really, really love that shampoo. It sounds funny, but I really love it." Belinda, single female in her late 20's

"My granddaughters liked (the biscuit) too so it didn't keep for long. But I can't find it anymore. I'm very disappointed and I miss it. I grew up with Arnotts – I can remember the tins – you used to go down to the shops and buy a shillings worth of broken biscuits. They were the best when I was kid." Carol, 60's, grandmother

At the completion of the interview, the final phase of data collection was to give the informants a competitive product to replace one of the brands chosen during the grocery shop. They were asked to use this product as a replacement, and were to record their thoughts and impressions in a diary. This diary comprised completely of open ended questions allowing for freedom in response without limitation to any pre-determined measurements.

The implementation of these qualitative methods within this study revealed

- The focus group confirmed emotions do have a role with consumer-brand relationships, without unnecessarily pre-defining the emotions.
- A video observation captured naturalistic patterns of behaviour during a grocery shop without having to rely on recall.
- The depth interview revealed that favourite brands are not necessarily bought all the time (as defined by purely behavioural measures of brand loyalty). Every shopper had a repertoire of products influenced by the depth of positive emotions they felt towards that brand. Negative emotions were also expressed if they were unable to locate their preferred brand, or if it had changed both in terms of packaging or perceived quality. Price was not expressed as an issue for those brands they felt strongly tied to.
- The self-completion diary introduced the presence of a competing product into the household, which may not have previously been considered. None of the households accepted the competitors brand as a replacement of their usual brand. Often this was due to perceived lower quality and lack of trust in the competitors brand.

These examples confirm the thoughts of Kirk and Miller (1986) who argued that a good qualitative technique will in fact implement a balance of both inductive and deductive procedures. If the interviewer is actively involved during the conversation, then this is similar to hypothesis testing because tentative conclusions reveal themselves which can later be validated (or invalidated) as further interrogation into the topic is undertaken or alternative qualitative methodologies are applied.

The future for qualitative research?

Whilst the training that most marketing practitioners and students receive remains firmly positivistic in its stance, it is hard to imagine that the potential that qualitative research offers, beyond that of an exploratory position, will be fully achieved. Rather than focusing on appreciating and having an understanding of research in all of its facets we produce acolytes at the altar of “facts” and “rationality”. Research equals numbers. As long as this attitude prevails, then qualitative research within a marketing framework will retain its image as the poor relation. As stated by Gummesson (2005) “Marketing theory must reinvent itself and be refined, redefined, generated and regenerated – or it will inevitably degenerate”(p.315).

Conclusion

There is no argument that the relevance of ‘inductive’ methodologies are for those circumstances where the concepts of the topic are not obvious. However, in those cases where there are already solid evidential theories, and hypothesized relationships can be established before final data collection begins then why shouldn’t qualitative research be used deductively (Hyde, 2000). Continued bickering over which process is ‘best’ only serves to trivialize research, and possibly prevents insight as a result of challenging the status quo, irrespective of the preferred paradigm (Davies and Fitchett, 2005). Expanding the use of qualitative methods beyond that of purely exploratory inputs must surely contribute to this. In doing so, we present an opportunity to witness new perspectives for those situations where concealed cues reveal greater insight into a phenomenon.

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