

A Rejoinder to the Opponents to Qualitative Research

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Qualitative research is often spotted as non-scientific, irrelevant and hard to understand in terms of results. It is usually heavily criticized for its lack of methodology and its subjectivity. However, in some cases, it appears that researchers do not have any other choice than using it if they want to really get 'into the consumers' minds'. This paper aims at explaining to the sceptic researchers regarding the utility of qualitative research, how it can bring different new insights to the research community, provided that its assumptions, assessment criteria and ethics are fully understood by authors, reviewers and readers.

Much of qualitative research has been criticized for its lack of objectivity, replicability, validity and generalizability, and has been relegated to the role of the poor cousin of quantitative research. Nonetheless, it is still widely used and advocated for by well-known researchers investigating specific topics. Its usefulness has been recognized in an exploratory approach to any kind of marketing research, since in this very case the researcher has limited experience and knowledge about the research issue (Zikmund & Babin, 2003). Besides, postmodern theories heavily rely on qualitative methods to be able to capture the postmodern attitude of consumers, when investigating a real social patterning of consumption.

This article aims at introducing the very specificities of qualitative research methods, vs. experiments. The final objective is to let the reader understand, if not convince him, of the usefulness of qualitative methods, taking into account inherent issues and debates surrounding it.

To achieve this goal, the paper is built around four sections, dealing respectively with the necessity to

use qualitative research in some cases, the validity and reliability criteria in qualitative research, the specificities necessary to be taken into account while writing or reviewing a qualitative paper, and lastly some ethical considerations specific to qualitative inquiries.

Yes, Qualitative Research is Relevant

Even before advocating for a more extensive use of qualitative techniques, we would like to remind the reader of some organic differences in-between experiments and qualitative way of data collection. Experiments try to find out how a certain *action* is performed or a certain attitude produced in the consumer's mind. It looks for providing a *descriptive* picture of the issue under investigation, with the final aim of providing *laws* that could be *generalized* to the whole population or a clearly identifiable sub-group of this population. *Sample size* matters a lot and should be *large* enough to enable the researcher to comprehensively *use the*

subjects in the experiment, while *manipulating* some characteristics (called variables) of it. In marketing, researchers are often interested in *explaining the final act of purchase*, given some features.

On the contrary, qualitative research is more interested into the very reasons *explaining* a certain attitude or conduct: while experiments are looking to answer the *how?* question, qualitative research seeks to answer the *why?*. In this case, researchers rely on *focused samples* with the objective of *inquiring* the consumers' minds via several proxies such as the *feelings or the behavioural intentions*. The idea is really to grasp the various features of the so-called *consumption experience*, *communicating* and *interacting* with subjects. Good *relationships* do matter a lot, since the researcher in a sense is part of the research. They do not aim at providing laws, but more at presenting a clearer picture of the consumers, which in the end could lead to very efficient managerial implications. They deliberately take an *explanatory stance*.

Given these differences, when then should a researcher not only consider using qualitative research, but ought to do so?

We have already mentioned the exploratory phase of the research process: researchers undertake qualitative research to define the problem or develop an approach. Qualitative research may help any researcher to generate hypotheses and identify variables that should be included in the research. Once again, qualitative research provides insights and understanding of the problem setting, while quantitative research seeks to quantify the data. This latter approach can therefore only be confirmatory, in the epistemological sense of the word.

But there are cases in which researchers rely only on qualitative research to conduct their whole

enquiry. And if they did otherwise, their findings would not be as deep and interesting for the research community as they actually are. Those researchers belong to a stream of research which has been labelled as CCT (Consumer Culture Theory). They investigate the sociocultural, symbolic, experiential and ideological features of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and no further explanation is needed to understand how qualitative research is valuable and necessary to such inquiries. The most important point is that to deal with such issues, we must construct the language of consumer research to reflect the reality and not vice versa. And the experience of reality is mediated by a language shaped by our needs as consumers and their gratification in consumption (Holbrook, 1987). For Holbrook and many postmodern researchers, conventional decision-oriented models do an excellent job of accounting for that part of consumer behaviour that is easiest to explain, most important to practical marketing implications and most trivial in terms of human happiness. "When we contemplate using such logically tight analytic schemes to address consumption phenomena as broad as loving a pet cat or dog [...] or appreciating the awesome beauty of the Sistine Chapel, we wonder which model better represents the consumption experience:

$\sum E_i V_i$

or



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Remember, we deal with “Feelings, nothing more than feelings”...

Yes, Qualitative Research Can be Valid and Reliable

Just check the right criteria! Actually, qualitative research cannot display the same criteria as quantitative research and experiments, for they simply do not deal with the same material and tools to analyze it. This sounds trivial, but is too often forgotten by the opponents to qualitative research. This is a pure epistemological debate, still ongoing within the research community. The very first assumption is that although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research. Instead, terminology that encompasses both, such as credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness is used.

Let us give a short description of all criteria which should be investigated when assessing a qualitative research. Those are internal acceptance, completeness, saturation, internal consistency and external confirmation.

Internal acceptance refers to the fact that the researcher, the research process and the results of the study have to be accepted by the people under investigation and all of those who may have taken part to it. For instance, in an ethnographic study focused on housewives, the whole family has to validate the pre-mentioned items, not only the housewife alone. This criteria is essential to fulfil, because it shows that trust has been built in-between the subjects and researcher, and is consistent with the epistemological assumption that participants handle their reality even if they are not conscious of it. Therefore, they should in one way or another be able to find back their picture in the results.

Completeness refers to the exhaustivity of the obtained results. It is mainly achieved via triangulation of methods and heavily relies on the

ability of tracking back the evolution of the research process.

Saturation refers to the idea that data collection should be stopped whenever the researcher comes up with repetitive data. It is the equivalent of the representativeness criterion in experiments and as such justifies for a potential generalization of the results. It is usually achieved via an iterative process, mainly in going back to the field to confront results and available new data.

Internal consistency refers to the connected characteristics that should be hold by the final results and analysis. Everything should be logically organised (even the written report), so that it sounds credible and understandable to any scholar, no matter his department and field of research.

Lastly, external confirmation refers to the validation of the results by various experts, knowledgeable people about the topic or such. The results should be comparable with other studies dealing from close or from far with some of the concepts studied in the research.

Given these various criteria, when trying to assess the validity of the research, one should look at internal acceptance, internal consistency and external confirmation. Similarly, when trying to assess the accuracy and reliability of the research, one should focus more on completeness and internal consistency criteria. But it is true that by nature, reliability is very difficult to assess in qualitative methods, for there can always be an irruption of social phenomena in an ongoing evolution, while the research is being conducted.

So, How Should Reviewers Review Qualitative Research?

There is a common perception that qualitative submissions fare particularly badly in the review process. This may be the visible side the application of inappropriate assessment criteria during the peer-review process. Once again, qualitative research is often considered as an ersatz of 'true scientific research', and therefore reviewer tend to re-use the same criteria as those they use while reviewing quantitative papers. But since the aims, the methodologies and the epistemological stance are different, there is no point in looking for the same points of interests in qualitative and quantitative researches.

Reminding that the role of the reviewer is twofold – he should act as a critic and as a coach simultaneously-, we would like to introduce now the various general criteria which are considered as desirable by reviewers of qualitative research. Actually, each qualitative epistemology has also specific criteria. Therefore, on top of the following criteria, positivist research, neo-empiricist/interpretivist research, critical theory research and postmodern research should be examined regarding different criteria. Additional information can be found in the ESRC Workshop paper regarding those specificities.

First of all, the study should be epistemologically grounded and all along consistent with this epistemological choice. Then, the researcher should be committed to the approach he elicited and be able to take a reflexive stance on it. The study should be theoretically robust, even in exploratory research, and present interesting, innovative and focused arguments. The approach to analysis and inferences made from the data support should be systematic. The written report should be fluid and present a coherent story. Any choice made by the

researcher should be explained and limitations should be recognised. Last but not least, the paper should make a contribution and take the debate forward.

Why Qualitative Research is Often Ethically Challenged

When deciding to rely on qualitative research, any researcher should ask to himself the two following crucial questions: Will my findings contribute in some way to what is valued as the common good? & Do I want to help and, at the very least, protect the people I study?

If the answer to at least one of the questions is positive, there are several ethical pitfalls the researcher should pay attention at: exploitive social research, deception, identification of subjects, fraternizing with disliked groups and participating in dubious bargains. While the two first are also ethical concerns in experiments, the other ones are very specific to qualitative research.

The concern regarding exploitive social research occurs when studies are conducted on subcultures on the edge of the law, or on vulnerable people (usually referred as "underdogs").

Deception can actually be accepted, but may become a problem when it causes the subject to unknowingly expose himself to harm. The case of covert observations is especially tricky, for even the researcher can be physically harmed...

Qualitative research uses subjects and personal information regarding these subjects to come up with its findings (interviews, private history, photographs, video, diaries...). The identity of the subject should always be protected and therefore, extensive efforts have to be taken by the researcher to erase the identification points of his subjects in the final reports. The second ethical pitfall regarding subject identification is that in some

cases subjects want to be identifiable for such and such reason (popularity...). This should never be allowed by the researcher (except maybe the very specific case of personal introspection!).

Sometimes, the researcher may have to conduct his study in settings displaying clashing values with his own values. He can either chose to stop the research and rely and an assistant, or use this clash to gain intellectual flexibility towards the research issue. It is really a personal choice. But it can be very disturbing, especially in participant observation...

The last ethical pitfall refers to the fact that some people expect some kind of compensation for taking part to the study. Since qualitative research is usually based on an interaction between the researcher and the subject, this can lead to non-ethical situations of sexual approach or such. If this is the case, research should be stopped at once...

As far as the conduct of the experiment is concerned, some ethical safeguards can be used to ensure its ethical characteristic. One of them is the writing of ethical guidelines such as the "Informed consent", a commonly used device in experiments. The point is that by nature qualitative research is changing and therefore in an interview, for example, questions not at all expected may arise and their topic not having been displayed in the Informed Consent form. That's the reason why in qualitative research, subjects are often being asked to give their consent after the data collection phase, on top of before it.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative researches are not only relevant but necessary to get a better understanding of very specific issues. Their specificities should not be ignored by the qualitative researcher as well as by

his reviewers in order to bring a fully new picture and insights to the research community.

Lastly, since qualitative research focuses on "Feelings, nothing else than feelings", the researcher should be highly reflective on his personal culture and how this may disturb either his way of collecting data, analysing it, presenting it and assessing ethical features of his study.

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