

Qualitative Marketing Research: The State of Journal Publications

Qualitative methods in marketing have become essential not only for their classical advantage in consumer behavior, but also for their benefits in dealing with big data and data mining. Research from International Data Corporation (IDC) shows that when it comes to online data, unstructured content accounts for 90% of all digital information. Under these circumstances, this study provides a literature review and analysis on the role and relation of qualitative methods with quantitative methods in marketing research. The paper analyzes research articles that include qualitative studies in the top marketing journals during the last decade and focuses on their topic, domain, methods used and whether they used any triangulation with quantitative methods. Starting from this analysis, the study provides recommendations that can help better integrate qualitative methods in marketing research, academics and practice. Keywords: Qualitative Analysis, Marketing, Triangulation

Introduction

The black swan theory refers to events hard to predict statistically, with three main characteristics: rarity, extreme “impact,” and retrospective predictability, due to the human nature’s capacity to formulate explanations for occurrences after the fact (Taleb, 2007). There is a point where even great statistics fail and give way to the (sometimes) unpredictable human nature and alternative explanations. It is here that qualitative research finds its greatest role, in its potential to understand and explain complex phenomena and situation, in acquiring everyday knowledge and in building theories (Cooper, 2008; Gummesson, 2005; Hirschman, 1986).

While the role of qualitative research in the marketing discipline has evolved in both research and practice, there are still many topics left to debate and numerous obstacles that qualitative methods users encounter (Alam, 2005; Bailey, 2014; Barnham, 2010; Martin, 2005). Besides discussions related to paradigms and the classical comparison between positivism and interpretivism, there is also a divide regarding the formulation of objectives and the tools used in qualitative research by academics and practitioners (Bailey, 2014). For example, researchers have noted that the qualitative methods are least understood and most criticized research methods, not only because of the characteristics of the methods, but also because of the manner in which they are used and promoted in journal publications (Alam, 2005).

Qualitative methods are even more important now, with the development of online consumer communications, from blogs to social media posts and product reviews, where qualitative tools of analysis can prove beneficial for researchers and practitioners. Research from International Data Corporation (IDC; Schubmehl & Vesset, 2014) shows that when it comes to online data, unstructured content accounts for 90% of all digital information. This can include information from customer surveys, response forms, online forums, social media, documents, videos, news reports, phone calls to call centers and information gathered by the sales team. This knowledge is typically textual rather than numerical, and it is not easily quantified (Noyes, 2015; Skågeby, 2015). Practitioners note that, when connected and used

properly, this type of information can help increase revenue, reduce costs, respond to customer needs more quickly and accurately, or bring products to market faster (Schubmehl & Vesset, 2014).

The research question that guided this investigation is related to how are qualitative methods used in marketing research, how did they evolved in the past decades, and whether they are keeping up with the new technologies and market changes. In this context, this study attempts to take the pulse of the major marketing research journals in a review of articles that use qualitative methods in order to assess their current use and make recommendations based on the information collected. Overall, this study paints the current state of qualitative marketing research and practice, as well as provides recommendations and directions for future research. The results of the analysis point towards ideas that can improve and facilitate the work of marketing academics and practitioners.

Literature Review

Despite the overwhelming importance of theory testing for the scientific world, especially in the positivistic paradigm of marketing, there are other aspects important in the process of scientific inquiry, including theory development and refinements (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013). From this point of view, we discuss shortly the characteristics of the qualitative methods and its discovery and explanation benefits, as well as its fit in the interpretivist and also the positivist paradigms.

Discovery, Explanation, Confirmation

Qualitative research, with a variety of interpretive techniques, is beneficial in describing phenomena and assessing their meaning, which is harder to do with quantitative methods. From this point of view, this type of research is essential in the discovery and explanation phases of research, even though it does not include capabilities of testing and confirmation. It includes numerous methods that can prove useful in marketing research, including observation, interview, historical research, ethnography, netnography (Alam, 2005; Golafshani, 2003; Gummesson, 2005; Kozinets, 2009; Smith & Lux, 1993). For example, qualitative methodologies such as field interviews and in-depth case studies are essential to developing theory in marketing (Alam, 2005). Qualitative methods can also help discover new variables and relationships and better extract the influence of the social context and of the human behavior (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Cohen, 1999; Cooper, 2008). For example, in advertising research, qualitative analysis can provide in-depth information on how consumers see and process ads and their meaning (Belk, 2017).

Qualitative research is efficient in understanding and explaining complex phenomena and situations, in acquiring everyday knowledge, in building theories, especially in the modern world, where marketing is viewed as a socially constructed enterprise (Calder & Tybout, 1987; Cooper, 2008; Golafshani, 2003; Gummesson, 2005; Hirschman, 1986; Skågeby, 2015). In the context of international marketing, for example, researchers have noted that the lack of qualitative studies may bring limitations on the advancement of this field, because the "how" and "why" of different international marketing phenomena might remain unanswered (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013).

The positivist paradigm is dominant in marketing, with an accent on quantitative research, numerical representation and concepts such as reliability and validity used in support of generalizations (Hanson & Grimmer, 2007; Hunt, 1994). While in recent years the use of qualitative methods has significantly increased, researchers note that the use of qualitative research in North America, Europe and the rest of the world has developed at different rates

and been informed by different traditions (Cassell, 2016). The debate on qualitative vs. quantitative data is present in the marketing discipline, as in other social sciences. Some of the main discussions focus on its weaknesses when compared to statistical data, including issues related to validity, reliability, subjectivity and rigor. Some of the challenges refer to criteria for judging the quality of studies (Kapoulas & Mitic, 2012).

Nevertheless, triangulation, as multiple methods research in which researchers use data from more than one source and employ more than one type of analysis, can also be a way to exploit the advantages of the qualitative method on its own or in combination with quantitative tools (Belk, 2017; Bryman, 2007; Davis, Golicic, & Boerstler, 2010; Hanson & Grimmer, 2007; Terrell, 2012). According to the widely accepted definition, in triangulation researchers may employ two or more qualitative methods, two or more quantitative methods, or a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in what is called a mixed methods approach.

Qualitative research is especially used in multimethod studies in combination with quantitative methods, where triangulation can help with a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question, in order to combine the rigor and validation of statistical data with the possibility of richer and more in-depth inquiry. In this context, in most cases researchers use a combination qualitative-quantitative, where qualitative methods are assigned to the exploratory phase of research (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Terrell, 2012). In consumer research, qualitative approaches can provide better insights regarding the context and intentions of consumers, their perceptions and motivations, not only short term reactions (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). Overall, the trend in articles on this topic is to call for more collaboration between qualitative and quantitative methods in order to improve discovery and better focus on complex phenomena (Stewart, 2009).

Nevertheless, even using qualitative methods alone can show significant rigor and reliability. Alam (2005) found that a theory generating idiographic research, such as field interviews, could be performed in a systematic manner, in a structured framework for data collection. Other authors focused on the reliability measurement of qualitative data by using a decision theoretic loss function and model the loss to the researcher of using wrong judgments, as well as using other types of quantitative measures that could be transposed in qualitative research (Rust & Cooil, 1994). Authors have used, for example, a proportional reduction in loss (PRL) reliability measure that has the potential for generalization for quantitative and qualitative measures (Zinkhan, 2006).

Even though qualitative studies do not deal with statistics, researchers have shown numerous techniques that maintain just as much rigor for this type of studies. For example, there are techniques to structure data, such as matrices and graphs, as well as the grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis, with very clear processes and procedures (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Other studies have analyzed how researchers using qualitative methods move between data and inferences, conceptualizations, and representations of data, making connections between the empirical and theoretical domains (Spiggle, 1994). With modern technologies, there is also computer software able to analyze text, provide trends, perform analytical tasks and even provide quantitative information.

Positivism vs. Interpretivism, Qualitative vs. Quantitative

As Kuhn (1962) mentioned, imposing a paradigm is a political business that manages the rapport of forces between methods. From this point of view, positivism has clearly dominated marketing research for decades and, even more, it also influenced the evolution of qualitative studies and researchers' attempts to extract statistics from qualitative data (Martin, 2005).

Research paradigms differ with regards to their ontologic assumptions (the nature of reality), epistemology (how to understand reality) and axiology (methodical access to what can be known about that reality). While positivism assumes that the world is objective and can be evaluated deductively with the ability of confirmation, interpretivism focuses on interpretations based on experiencing phenomena, exploring in order to develop theories, with a relative approach to judging which view is better (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Golafshani, 2003; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988).

In marketing research, the positivist and interpretive paradigms have been analyzed in terms of their ontological, axiological and epistemological assumptions (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988) and have been the key focus of the qualitative versus quantitative debates (Deshpande, 1983). In general, qualitative research is associated with the interpretive approach, with introspection, interpretation and experiences. Quantitative research is equated to empirical research in the positivistic tradition, focused on experimental design and statistical procedures such as multiple regression and structural equation modelling (Bahl & Milne, 2010; Carlson, 2008; Denzin, 2001).

Table 1

	Positive	Interpretive
Goal	Predict	Understand
Knowledge sought	General, context independent	Specific, context-dependent
Research	step by step controlled experiment with statistical significance	Descriptive evolving design derived from the natural settings
Characteristics	Objective Nomethetic Quantitative Outsider Etic	Subjective Idiographic Qualitative Insider Emic
Criticism	Leave out social context	Based on individuals experience and interpretation

As it can be seen in Table 1, there are significant differences between the two paradigms, and many criticism reasons for the qualitative methods associated with the interpretive approach (Carlson, 2008). While the differences between the two paradigms might be clear, associating quantitative to positivism and qualitative to interpretivism, with no chance of middle ground, cooperation or encounter between the two might be too simplistic (Belk, 2006; Deshpande, 1983; Hopkinson & Hogg, 2006). Some researchers have even shown that qualitative data, in certain forms, can be used in both positivist and interpretivist studies, and that validity can be assessed for qualitative work (Alam, 2005; Gummesson, 2005; Hopkinson & Hogg, 2006). In order to assess the degree of triangulation and use of both methods for their specific strengths, the study analyzes the qualitative research published in top marketing journals during the past decade.

Role of the Researchers

As researchers focused mainly on quantitative studies in the form of surveys and experiments, the interest in consumer behavior in the digital environment and social media has inevitably led us towards qualitative methods that help explain online consumer content, interactions and decisions, from interviews to content analysis, netnography and social network analysis (Alam, 2005; Kozinets, 2009; Noyes, 2015; Skågeby, 2015). These methods can prove

extremely helpful in the online environment, in social media and in the context of big data and data mining.

From this point of view, it is very helpful to understand the influence that qualitative methods have in the marketing literature, as well as their distribution in different journals and marketing areas. Therefore, our decision was to understand the current use of qualitative research methods in marketing and provide recommendations on how this can be improved, considering its importance in the digital business world (Noyes, 2015; Skågeby, 2015).

Methods

Researchers have noted that theory-testing methodologies such as surveys and experiments are the dominant methodologies in marketing, even though qualitative methods such as interviews and in-depth case studies, as well as new techniques and analysis software, can contribute to developing theory in marketing (Alam, 2005; Gummesson, 2005). Alam (2005) found only about 35 studies published based on some form of qualitative methods, between 1990-2003, in the top marketing journals (*Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*). Another study performed a content analysis of 1,195 articles published between 1993 and 2002 in three prominent marketing journals and found that 24.80 per cent of articles employed qualitative methods in some form (Hanson & Grimmer, 2007), in order to provide more insight or a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Under these circumstances, our objective is to analyze what happened within the last decade regarding qualitative studies in top marketing journals, the topics analyzed through this type of research, methods used, as well as if a combination with quantitative methods is present. For this purpose, we searched for qualitative studies in the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Marketing Science*, the *Journal of Consumer Research*, and the *European Journal of Marketing* during the period 2005-2014. The search used the keyword “qualitative” to purposefully find studies that mention qualitative methods or research in their text. While we found over 300 articles based on the search query, after reading them, many were eliminated for using the word “qualitative” in other purposes. We also removed from the analysis articles that were editorials and comments from editors or researchers, while some of these studies were taken into consideration in the literature review section. We also eliminated from our analysis a few studies that only mentioned the use of qualitative methods for scale of measurement item generation, without offering any details on what procedures they performed. Overall, 149 articles that included qualitative methods were analyzed in depth and classified, as in can be seen in the table provided in the Appendix.

Results

Overall, the presence of qualitative studies in top marketing journals has improved since the previous decade; however, one third of the studies we analyzed came from the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR), followed by the *European Journal of Marketing* (EJM), the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (JAMS) and the *Journal of Marketing* (JM), as it can be seen from Table 2.

Table 2

Journal	%
<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	32.9
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	24.8
<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i>	22.1
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	15.4
<i>Marketing Science</i>	2.0
<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>	1.3

Topics Analyzed

The most common topics studied in these articles were related to consumer behavior (over 50%), followed by marketing strategy and business-to-business, as shown in Table 3. Most consumer behavior studies were published in the *Journal of Consumer Behavior* and included topics such as consumer identity, values and taste, as well as consumption experiences (Bahl & Milne, 2010; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Consumer behavior topics also included analyzes focused on invisible brands (Coupland, 2005), material culture (Epp & Price, 2010; Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011) and fetishes in contemporary consumption (Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011). They included studies from various industries, including banking (Bernthal et al., 2005), medical services (Botti et al., 2009), arts (Chen, 2009), fashion (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and gambling (Cotte & Latour, 2009; Humphreys, 2010). Consumer behavior articles published in other journals, such as the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* and the *European Journal of Marketing*, have analyzed issues related to customer loyalty, claims and complaining behavior (Chiou & Droge, 2006; Voorhees et al., 2006; Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010), consumer reviews (Ludwig et al., 2013; Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012) and word-of-mouth (Mazzarol et al., 2007) and service separation (Keh & Pang, 2010). Topics such as consumer relationships and brand communities are encountered in multiple journal articles across publications (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Devlin & McKechnie, 2008; Diamond et al., 2009; Gruner et al., 2013; MacLaran & Brown, 2005; Muniz Jr. & Schau, 2005; Raciti et al., 2013; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Marketing strategy articles include topics such as market orientation (Blocker et al., 2010; Macedo & Pinho, 2006; Ruokonen et al., 2008), product creativity (Burroughs et al., 2011), innovation Coviello & Joseph, 2012; Griffiths-Hemans & Grover, 2006; Rajala et al., 2012), and green marketing (Leonidou et al., 2013). Some of the issues analyzed in the articles that belong in the business-to-business area are related to interfirm learning (Perez et al., 2013), franchise relationships (Brookes and Roper, 2011; Doherty & Alexander, 2006; Doherty et al., 2014; Hodge et al., 2013), business reference value (Kumar et al., 2013) and crises in business markets (Grewal et al., 2007).

Qualitative Methods

Regarding the qualitative method of analysis used, the most utilized tool was the interview, in an overwhelming proportion, followed by ethnography, case studies and content analysis, as shown in Table 3. Studies used exploratory, open-ended interviews (Dahl & Moreau, 2007; Ellen et al., 2006; Viswanathan et al., 2010), phenomenological interviews (Arsel et al., 2011); Ulver & Ostberg, 2014; Wong & King, 2008), image-elicited depth interviews (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Cotte & Latour, 2009), as well as interviews based on

grounded theory (Batra et al., 2012; Beverland et al., 2010; Closs Speier, & Meacham, 2011; Law et al., 2012).

It is surprising that, especially when it comes to online data analysis, we did not find a more significant interest in the use of netnography, considering the popularity of this new method among young researchers and of its creator, Kozinets (2009). This might be beneficial not only for analyzing consumer sentiment, for example, but also in the context of other topics, such as brand engagement and market maven behavior. Regarding marketing strategy and business-to-business studies, the qualitative methods of preference included the interview and the case study.

The information extracted from this analysis shows that articles analyzing topics related to consumer behavior, and especially publications in the Journal of Consumer Research, are prevalent in the qualitative research field. Nevertheless, topics that can also benefit tremendously from methods such as interviews, including business-to-business, relationship marketing and sales, have a certain presence in the qualitative studies, though not nearly close to their potential positive impact for these topics. From the distribution of qualitative studies in the journals analyzed, it can be seen that some top marketing journals have less interest in qualitative research, with the exception of EJM, a journal that has a significant presence for a generalist marketing journal.

Table 3

Method	%
interviews	59.2
ethnography	8.1
content analysis	6.1
focus group	4.7
case study	4.0
grounded theory	3.4
observation	2.8
netnography	2.7
text mining	2.0
case study, interviews	1.4

Topic	%
consumer behavior	54.4
strategy	9.4
B2B	8.1
branding	6.0
sales	3.4
innovation	2.7
Relationship marketing	2.7
Services	2.7
international marketing	1.3

Triangulation with Quantitative Methods

When it comes to triangulation, we focused on analyzing and quantifying the combination of qualitative methods with quantitative methods. The objective was to see

whether journals and researchers are more open to studies that don't use qualitative methods as sole strategy of analysis, even if qualitative triangulation is employed. Some researchers have promoted the development of mixed methods research and the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings (Bryman, 2007).

After quantifying the results, they show that 65% of the 149 studies analyzed in depth did not include any type of quantitative studies. The remaining articles used triangulation mostly in combination with surveys, the most common method of quantitative research. In this case, the qualitative studies were mostly employed in exploratory purposes and as a contribution to setting up better quantitative studies. Qualitative studies were also used in combination with experiments, though in a lower proportion. Regarding triangulation, most qualitative studies are used for exploratory and descriptive purposes (mainly through interviews), followed by empirical papers using surveys or experiments. The multi-method approach and the fact that they present an empirical analysis make these papers easier to market for journals and conferences. It was also interesting to see that many articles that we eliminated from our analysis gave very little importance to the qualitative studies they performed in order to create scales of measurement, where the entire procedure was omitted. Overall, the studies using triangulation show the benefits of qualitative research and its complementary role with quantitative research.

The number of qualitative articles also shows that the situation has improved compared to decades ago, even considering similar studies performed a decade ago (Alam, 2005). Nevertheless, it still does not place qualitative research in a positive light compared to quantitative research. While many researchers consider that journal editors and reviewers, as well as the rigors of the positivist paradigm, keep qualitative studies from being published in top journals, another reason could be related to the penetration of the qualitative method in graduate and especially doctoral education. It might be that not a disdain for qualitative research keeps it at bay, but actually the lack of structured education and procedures. In this case, triangulation with quantitative methods is used by researchers not only from necessity, but also to provide reviewers' a quantitative study where rigor and the accuracy of the method are much easier to analyze and quantify (Varadarajan, 2003).

Recommendations

As our reviews of the marketing literature showed, there is no easy and simple prescription regarding the use of qualitative research in academics and in practice. However, there are a few measures that every involved party in the marketing discipline can take in order to clarify what qualitative research is, how it should be performed and when it is recommended.

One of the options of improving both quantitative and qualitative methods is to cooperate in order to improve and lead to a progress of knowledge and understanding (Carlson, 2008; Davis, Golicic, & Boerstler, 2010; Parasuraman & Zinkhan, 2002). As Gummesson (2005) noted, being quantitative can contribute to raising the scientific status of marketing from quantitative point of view, while qualitative methods can do so regarding marketing as a social science, but is not sufficient, and a combination of both worlds might add substantial synergy to research in marketing. Moreover, as the market and research show, successful practitioners are increasingly using qualitative and quantitative models in order to better determine where, when, and how to make successful business decisions (Fox & Groesser, 2016). In the same context, researchers should formulate clear standards of using qualitative methods, processes and transparency regarding information collected, so that editors or reviewers can assess its rigor. Therefore, we formulate a few recommendations that apply to academic researchers, educators and students, as well as managers and market research practitioners.

Research Recommendations

Instead of rejecting the qualitative method from the start, because of potential publication difficulties, researchers should consider its benefits in certain situations, such as when exploration, explanation and interpretation are essential for the study. Moreover, some research studies can benefit from the use of triangulation with quantitative methods, when the in-depth analysis of a qualitative study is combined with the numerical and statistical rigor of a quantitative method. For example, the analysis can combine different techniques, such as interviews or content analysis, especially in online context, with field experiments or effectiveness measures.

A major issue related to the use of qualitative research and its high rejection rate for journals is represented by criteria of evaluation of the quality of the study. Thereof, researchers can create standards of quality for processes and qualitative tools that make it easier for everybody to perform or evaluate such as study. Formulating criterions of goodness of qualitative research can also benefit future uses of the method.

Collaboration with researchers from other fields, as well as practitioners, can contribute to improving the use of the method. A better grasp on the use of qualitative techniques in practice, criteria used for evaluation, modern tools and techniques can be obtained by encouraging collaborative studies with marketing practitioners and by generating qualitative studies that present relevant information and high-quality research methods to marketers.

Academic Recommendations

Representatives of the academic world and not only researchers should maintain a flow of communication with market research companies, in order to assess the latest trends, tools and technologies in practice. This is essential in their ability to provide students with the information necessary to perform even basic market research studies when they graduate. Business schools should teach qualitative methods and standards of research at least in graduate and especially doctoral programs, given the importance awarded to these methods by the most appreciated market research companies.

Business schools could also improve the relationship between doctoral programs and market research companies from this point of view and help graduate students become more involved in market studies that also have high relevance and practical value, not also theoretical value. Nevertheless, academics can encourage doctoral students to create dissertations using triangulation and use qualitative methods for their exploration and explanation benefits.

Managerial Recommendations

Managers and market research companies could focus more on the rigor of their qualitative data analysis and on collaborating with academics to formulate standards of quality that can be used to ensure the reliability and validity of qualitative studies. Given the richness of tools and innovations used by practitioners, it is recommended for companies to enhance their efforts regarding the promotion of qualitative software tools to the academic community.

Practitioners should also be more engaged in top marketing conferences and showcase research tools and methods used in practice, especially the innovative techniques regarding big data mining and social media data analysis. Marketers can also collaborate with doctoral programs that can offer the opportunity to interact with highly trained and motivated researchers and the possibility for sharing and exchanging ideas and information.

Conclusions

The paper represents a qualitative study that paints the current state of qualitative marketing research and provides suggestions for improvement and future studies. The analysis of a decade of top marketing journals showed that qualitative studies are published much more than in previous decades; however, it still happens mostly in the field of consumer research and preferably if the articles contain some triangulation with a quantitative method. This denotes that qualitative methods are used in the exploratory purpose to prepare better quantitative studies. Publication analysis and discussions with researchers still show a divide between qualitative and quantitative researchers and the existence of the “or” instead of the “and” placed between the two methods. Given this overall situation, there are a few conclusions and future steps that can be formulated from our discussions, analysis and readings.

First, the benefits of qualitative research need to be understood, as well as its position as a complement or alternative in certain situations, not as a competitor, to quantitative research. Second, the idea of “either one or another” can be easily adapted, as it could be seen in the case of the articles presenting triangulation cases. Third, the comparison of which one is superior to the other can be easily adapted to the much more efficient approach of which method is more appropriate for the specific research situation and topic being studied. Fourth, better cooperation with the industry can help keep up to date with the latest technologies and tools, and can contribute to the formulation of standards and criteria for qualitative research methods.

Overall, this article represents an opportunity to identify potential trends, common issues and formulate solutions that can benefit the marketing discipline and improve the efficiency of marketing practice.

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Appendix

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