

A Qualitative Approach to Marketing Research and Business Performance Measurement



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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to discuss about the qualitative approach to marketing research as part of business performance measurement in the present. This paper compares three qualitative approaches include phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography. It would be beneficial for the development of the theory and help making effective business decisions. This paper shows that qualitative methods are now acceptable for consumer research and a wider field of marketing. This paper offers from the perspective of qualitative research methods and some of their possible application in marketing research and business performance measurement.

KEYWORDS: qualitative, marketing, business performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Business performance measurement is increasingly evolving from financial performance to strategic performance such as customer satisfaction. Business performance measurement is recognized as increasingly complex and therefore requires more varied and sophisticated quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative methods are believed to provide a better description and measurement of behavioral patterns and outcomes. Quantitative methods are usually faster and more economical, and their reliance on larger samples can be a more effective aid to policy decision making. However, these methods are inflexible, and because they lack the ability to explain the behavior being measured, their role in theory development is limited. Moreover, because quantitative methods concentrate on what exists, or because they offer only limited help when looking towards the future (Easterby - Smith et al., 2008). Therefore, qualitative methods are more likely to contribute to the evolution of new theories through understanding behavioral processes and individual experiences. Positivist criticism of the quantitative approach to qualitative research is its low reliability and lack of contribution to the body of knowledge. Meanwhile, quantitative researchers have also been criticized for not appreciating the nuances of meaning behind their statistical formulations (Deshpande, 1983). Therefore, when the strengths and weaknesses of the two methods are compared they complement each other. The strengths of one approach are related to the weaknesses of the other. Quantitative methods have been developed for the task of verifying or confirming theories. Meanwhile, qualitative methods were deliberately developed for the task of finding or generating theory (Firestone, 1987). The debate between quantitative research and qualitative research cannot actually be separated from the research paradigm used. In its development, the debate between the positivism and interpretivism paradigms shows signs of slowing down along with the acceptance of the various methods used (Goulding, 2005; Brown, 2003). In The last two decades have seen an increase in the number of articles with a qualitative approach in various well-known journals and the qualitative approach itself is no longer seen as 'speculative' research (Goulding, 2005). This confirms that there is room to take advantage of in-depth qualitative research.

2. RESEARCH PARADIGM

All research disciplines are conducted within a paradigm. A research paradigm is understood as the basic beliefs on which a theory will be built, which fundamentally influences how the researcher sees the world and determines the perspective and form of understanding of how things are related. Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that a paradigm is a basic set of beliefs as a guide to action. A paradigm can be summarized and based on three fundamental questions, namely ontological, epistemological and methodological. Ontology refers to the form and nature of reality. While epistemology is a basic belief about knowledge and focuses on the process of knowing while methodology asks how to gain knowledge in the world (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Research Paradigm Assumptions (Creswell, 1994)

Assumptions	Question (what is?)	Quantitative	Qualitative
Ontological (nature of reality)	<i>Nature of reality?</i>	<i>Objective & singular, apart from researcher</i>	<i>Subjective & multiple (by participants)</i>
Epistemological (nature of knowledge)	<i>Relationship of researcher and subject?</i>	<i>Researcher is independent from subject</i>	<i>Researcher interact with subject</i>
Axiological	<i>Role of value?</i>	<i>Value free/ unbiased</i>	<i>Value laden/ biased</i>
Rhetorical	<i>language of research?</i>	<i>Formal/ impersonal/ specific quantitative words</i>	<i>Informal/ personal/ qualitative words</i>
Methodological	<i>Process of research?</i>	<i>Deductive/ cause & effect/ context free/ generalizability</i>	<i>Inductive/ emerging patterns/ context-bound/ understanding</i>

Research Paradigm Table

Source: Brand (2008), Creswell (2007), Guba dan Lincoln (1994)

The main paradigms used for research are positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory. Table 1 shows the basic beliefs related to positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory. It is important to consider the philosophy of research, particularly beliefs in the objective or subjective existence of data (ontology), and how we come to know and understand data (epistemology).

2.1 Positivist

Positivism adopts a realist ontology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). An ontological perspective of the positivist paradigm argues that reality is independent and external. According to positivist epistemology, science is seen as a way to obtain truth, to understand the world well so that it can be predicted and controlled (Krauss, 2005). Therefore, a deductive approach is usually taken in positivism on the grounds that it will obtain more accurate and measurable results and also hypotheses can be generated and tested. In short, data manipulation, concept operationalization, and statistical verification can be carried out. Objectivity is also an important concept in positivism epistemology. Therefore, quantitative research is mostly carried out in positivism. Quantitative research is more interested in defining structures, identifying relationships between structures and how to represent them in measurable terms. Attitudes that must be objectively justified, verified and tested by research methods must also maintain a distance between the researcher and the subject. Bias in research can be eliminated by using a good research design. The advantage of quantitative research methods is that research results can be generalized and measurable. However, this methodology relies heavily on hypotheses that must be tested rigorously, measurement methods and analysis techniques (Brand, 2008).

There are four criteria required in positivism. First, internal validity, meaning the degree to which the findings correctly map the phenomenon. Second, external validity is the degree to which findings can be generalized to other settings similar to the research conducted. Third, reliability means the extent to which findings can be replicated, or reproduced by other researchers. Fourth, objectivity, namely the extent to which the findings are free from bias (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

2.2 Interpretative

In contrast to positivism, the phenomenological or interpretive approach is concerned with understanding behavior from the perspective of those involved. Interpretive or phenomenological methodology is said to be ideographic because it seeks to reveal the internal logic that supports human actions through the use of methods. Research that allows the researcher to gain access to the culture being studied. The phenomenological approach seeks to arrive at an in-depth understanding of why behavior occurs. It is more concerned with understanding and explaining different behavioral processes and individual experiences than with measuring how often behavioral outcomes occur. Thus, given that the goal of interpretivist research is to provide breadth of participant perspective, validity is a more important assessment tool for this approach. This allows

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the researcher to gain full access to the knowledge and meaning of the informants (Easterby - Smith et al., 2008). The emphasis is on the contextual nature, not the generalization of knowledge, focusing on collecting rich data rather than reducing data. Therefore, qualitative research methods tend to be used more when researching within this paradigm.

2.3 Critical Theory

Meanwhile, the critical theory paradigm is concerned with connecting subjects and objects (Brand, 2009). The difference in assumptions between ontology and epistemology is not very clear. The methodology is transactional, with a focus on the need to transform ignorance and misunderstanding into awareness (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This method relies on awareness of all paradigms and draws on techniques related to qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

3. QUALITATIVE APPROACH

As explained above, qualitative research is based on an interpretivist paradigm which has a different research design from quantitative research. Qualitative research designs include narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case studies, and action research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2007). Narrative research is defined as "an oral statement or written text that provides an explanation of an event or action or a series of events or actions, and is connected chronologically". Phenomenological research explains the meaning of an individual's or group's lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Meanwhile, grounded theory aims to move beyond description and to generate or discover theories that are based on data and experiences from participants who share the same processes and actions or interactions. Grounded theory also emphasizes understanding social interactions, social processes and social change from the participant's perspective (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Meanwhile, ethnographic research design emphasizes paying attention to the cultural norms of the participants (Creswell, 2007). It focuses on a cultural group and describes the overall pattern of sharing and learning the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a cultural group. Case studies involve the study of an issue that is explored through cases in a single setting or context (Creswell, 2007). Meanwhile, action research is more likely to investigate problems in certain situations in the study area by involving participants (Brydon-Mill et al., 2003). Next, we will discuss in more depth three qualitative research approaches, namely phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography.

3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as both a philosophy and a methodology has been used in organizational and consumer research in order to develop an understanding of complex issues that may not be directly implied in surface responses. However, in the field of marketing, it has perhaps been done more to look at both the principles of principles underlying phenomenology and applications to a variety of research situations. Examples include Thompson's (1996) exploration of gender consumption and lifestyle, Thompson and Hirschman's (1995) analysis of self-care practices and self-conceptions, Thompson et al., (1990) study about the daily consumption practices of married women, and Thompson and Haytko (1997) who deconstructed the meaning of fashion discourse and its relationship with identity and self-conceptions. Mick and Demoss (1990) explore personal gift giving, O'Guinn and Faber (1989) work on compulsive shopping, Woodruffe-Burton et al. (2002) conducted research on gender and addictive consumption. Meanwhile, Goulding et al. (2002) analyzed culture for postmodern identity fragmentation and the emergence of new communities, and Seebarsingh et al. (2002) researched the relationship between cosmetic surgery and identity construction.

3.1 Grounded Theory

The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method that uses a number of systematic procedures to develop theory from data. This approach was first developed by two sociologists, namely Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. The aim of the grounded theory approach is data theorization. Theorizing is a method of constructing theories that is action or interaction oriented. This approach starts from data towards a theory. Grounded theory was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that many existing methods focus on obtaining facts to verify theories. Researchers tend to focus on data that fulfill their prior perspectives and predict their assumptions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) then introduced the procedures necessary to develop theory from qualitative data. Rather than starting with a hypothesis, this approach begins by generating data in order to develop a concept or theory (Glaser, 2002).

Meanwhile, Locke (2001) explains four stages as a guide for researchers who will use a grounded theory approach. Stage 1 is to compare the incidents that apply to each category. Stage 2 is integrating categories and their properties. Stage 3 of the grounded theory approach is developing the theory, and the final stage is writing the theory. Data collection or data generation in grounded theory plays an important role in research. It has an important role in conducting and determining the quality and credibility of research (Charmaz, 2006). According to Marshall and Rossman (2011) qualitative researchers usually rely on four main methods to collect information: participation, direct observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of documents and cultural materials.

The primary key to excellence in grounded theory, as in all qualitative research, is that both data collection and analysis techniques must be rigorous.

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In grounded theory, a sampling scheme changes dynamically with research developments (Morse, 2010). According to Morse (2010), the main types of sampling methods in grounded theory are convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and theoretical sampling. The sampling methods usually used and identified by researchers in conducting grounded theory research are purposive and theoretical sampling. Purposive sampling is usually used initially by researchers and then followed by theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Purposive sampling deliberately seeks to recruit respondents based on identified features or characteristics. Meanwhile, theoretical sampling is described as the process of collecting data to produce theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling is an integral part of grounded theory in sampling which is based on concepts derived from data (Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Constant comparative methods and data categorization facilitate theoretical sampling because they will assist researchers in identifying gaps that need to be filled in order to develop theory and provide a rich source of data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

In contrast to conventional sampling where researchers are taught about sampling people and control variables, theoretical sampling does not focus on people but concepts. It is described as the process of collecting data to generate theory by analyzing initial data and then using codes to develop the data collection further (Glaser, 1978). The idea of theoretical sampling is not to control the sample but to generate data from the sample until no new data is generated which is called 'data saturation' or data saturation. However, saturation is not only about new data being generated but also when data that has already been developed is based on a theme (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that initial sampling should be based on a general perspective rather than preconceived theoretical views. Therefore, initial data collection begins with the research phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). Initial samples are used to generate data. Therefore, interviews as one of the main methods in grounded theory are very flexible in their guidelines. All participants may be asked a central question but some may change to develop a theoretical focus to develop the data (Glaser, 1978). The questions used will be broad in the initial interview but will then be narrowed down to more specifics to contribute to the saturation of emerging concepts and categories. Qualitative data is usually in the form of words rather than numbers, and has always been a staple of several fields in the social sciences, especially anthropology, history, and political science. In the last decades there has been a shift to a more qualitative paradigm (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) there are three approaches to qualitative data analysis including interpretivism, social anthropology and collaborative social research. In interpretivism, for example phenomenological and social interactionism, there is an inevitable interpretation of the meanings made both by social actors and by researchers. Interpretivists of all types also insist that researchers be more 'detached' from the objects of their study than from informants. They argue, researchers have their own understandings, their own beliefs, their own conceptual orientations, they are also members of a particular culture at a particular moment (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The second approach to qualitative data analysis is social anthropology which is interested in behavioral regularities in everyday situations including the use of language, artifacts, rituals, and existing relationships. The third approach is collaborative social research where the researcher joins closely with the participants from the start (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Analysis in grounded theory begins immediately after data collection. Data analysis will occur simultaneously to produce theory. These strategies include simultaneous data collection and analysis, data coding processes, constant comparison, memo writing, sampling to refine the researcher's theoretical ideas and integration of theoretical frameworks (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis will begin by immersing the data through various transcription readings, reflective diaries, and field notes. This is then followed by repeated sorting, coding and comparisons which are carried out through the overall analysis process (Charmaz, 2006). The first step in grounded theory analysis is an emphasis on intensive coding of initial data. Charmaz (2006) suggests two stages of the coding process, namely open coding and focused coding. Open coding allows researchers to extract data by looking at social processes and identifying areas where data is lacking and should be collected next. Focus coding is the second phase used to synthesize large amounts of data and explain the relationships between them. These codes have been described as more directional, selective, and conceptual (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Glaser (1978) explains the coding process as substantive coding and theoretical coding. Substantive coding is codes that are generated from data and continuously compared with each other to form categories while theoretical coding explains the relationships between substantive codes. According to Glaser (1978), as codes are generated from data, they are constantly compared with each other. The codes were then organized into the same categories (Glaser, 1978). This category consists of substantive codes or open codes in which the limiting process occurs by itself until saturation is reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The relationship between substantive codes will be explained which conceptualizes theoretical codes and this will give rise to a theory. Strauss and Corbin (1990) provide structured methods for coding data including open coding (disaggregation of data into units), axial coding (confirming relationships between categories), and selective coding (integration of categories to produce theory). Analysis begins with open coding which breaks down the data into codes. This is done intensively by analyzing words or sentences that try to reveal the data. Open coding was then followed by axial coding relating categories to their subcategories. The problem identified in this step is that it may be difficult to understand how these codes are connected to each other (Glaser, 1978). Glaser (1978) provides a solution to read the data again and again then continue coding even when the researcher is unsure about the results of the analysis. They should write down their thoughts and then discuss them with

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others. From the data collected, important points are marked with a series of codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Then these codes are grouped into similar concepts in order to form categories. The categories that emerge will be labeled and saturation achieved (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Finally, selective coding was applied in order to move in a more abstract, analytical, and conceptual direction. These are the most important parts of grounded theory because they are interconnected with many other categories and explain most of what is going on.

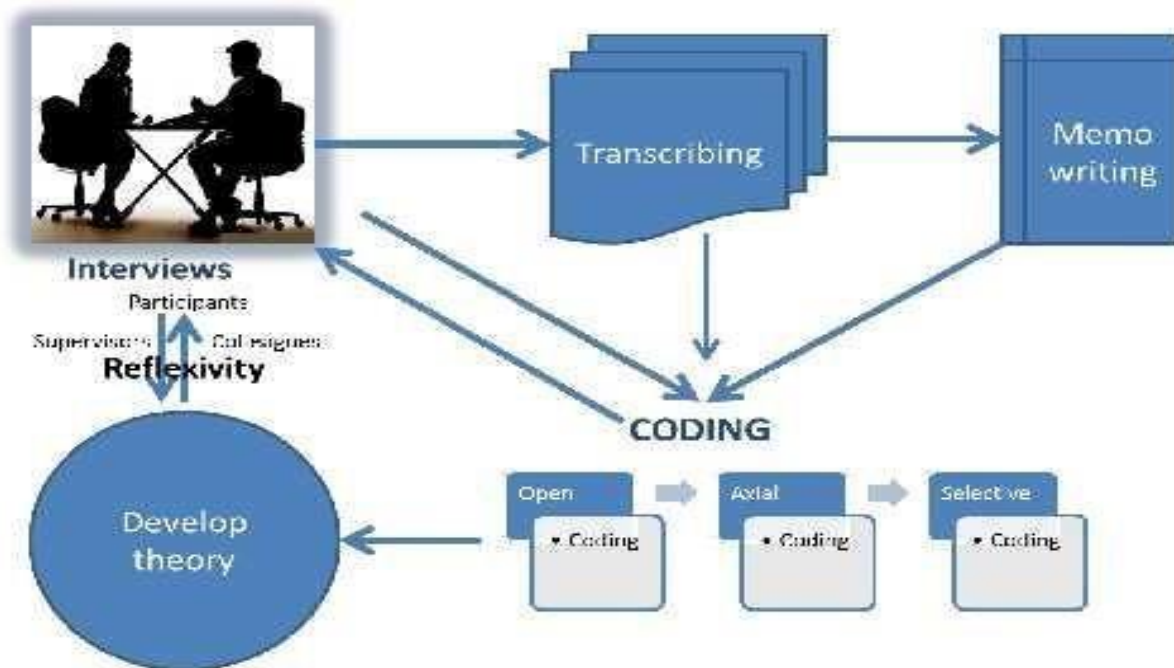


Figure 1. Coding Process

Source: Adaptation from Glaser and Strauss (1967)

Writing memos is an important part of the analysis as it relates to coding the data and completing the first draft of the analysis. Memos will help develop category characteristics and integrate them in order to create theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Memos will include operational notes on data collection as well as theoretical memos. Theoretical memos include initial ideas about the data and emerging 'hypotheses' about relationships between codes. Therefore, it allows researchers to explore the processes and actions included in each category and examine how the various categories may be interrelated which is considered an operational memo (Charmaz, 2006).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) define data saturation as no additional data found. There are two phases of data saturation, namely category saturation and theoretical saturation (Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The saturation category relates to the process that describes that no new information emerges during coding. Theoretical saturation is concerned with the conclusions of theoretical generations and not simply confirmation. This will require verification between generating theoretical insights and gathering evidence. Reflexivity is researchers' awareness of how they can influence the study through their experiences, beliefs, and interests, and how their own assumptions can influence the study findings (Mruck and Mey, 2007). Mruck and Mey (2007) stated that reflexivity is about how researchers interact with subjects in the field, what problems they encounter, and how problems are not resolved. In qualitative methods this reflexivity is not only generated during data collection, but also in data analysis where the researcher's sensitivity and background influences influence this process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Reflexivity is carried out by periodically reviewing coding data to increase the credibility of the analysis. In addition, together with writing memos it will assist the researcher in gaining insights from other perspectives and prevent the researcher from sensitizing the data or closing the participant's perspective.

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3.1 Ethnography

The roots of the ethnographic approach lie in cultural anthropology, with its focus on small-scale societies and central concepts, remaining important today. The main concern in this approach is the construction and maintenance of culture. Ethnography aims to look beyond what people say to understand the meaning of the shared systems we call culture. Ethnography can take the form of a complete or partial description of a group as a way to identify common threads of common phenomena, whether related to religion, social relations or management styles.

Arnould (1998) provides an in-depth discussion of consumer-oriented ethnography indicating that "ethnography tries to explain structured patterns of cultural and/or social action not only in cognitive, affective aspects, but also in behavioral aspects". Stebbins (1997) describes the potential of ethnographic research to study lifestyles in the cultural or sub-cultural contexts in which they apply, while Arnold and Wallendorf (1994) discuss the relevance of ethnography with market orientation for developing marketing strategies.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative methods offer a more depth-oriented approach to analysis in marketing research and business performance measurement. Grounded theory as a methodology that emerged from the discipline of sociology which focuses on people's behavior both individually and in groups has developed and is recognized as a reliable method in qualitative research in the fields of marketing and business. There are several components in the grounded theory approach that researchers need to pay attention to. First, there must be simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis. Second, analytical codes and categories must be built from data, not from developed logical 'hypotheses'. Third, the use of the constant comparison method, which involves comparison during the analysis stage. Fourth, theory development at each step of data collection and analysis.

Fifth, write memos to outline categories, determine their nature, determine relationships between categories, and identify gaps. Sixth, sampling is aimed at theory construction, not for population representation. Seventh, conduct a literature review after developing an independent analysis. Grounded theory is more flexible in terms of data, but emphasizes theoretical sampling and saturation of both data and theory before claiming a theory is built. This has the potential for a number of research directions and contexts that go beyond consumer behavior, for example, marketing relationships or even sales situations.

Ethnography is generally participant observation and interviews. Her research agenda focuses on inter-departmental dynamics, gender issues, marketing ethics or consumption of green products. Meanwhile, phenomenology has its own unique characteristics and philosophy of experience, which may be useful in terms of building theories based on everyday life, whether in terms of consumption or strategic decision making.

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