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A B S T R A C T
Business-to-business marketing research has a long tradition of using qualitative case studies. Industrial Marketing Management (IMM) has actively encouraged the use of case methods, resulting in many important theoretical advances in the field. However, debate still rages over what constitutes “good case research”. This article addresses this issue from a positivist standpoint. We examine the how authors address issues of quality in the 105 qualitative case studies published in IMM between 1971 and 2006. Four periods were identified: 1971–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, and 2000–2006. Findings demonstrate that, from a positivist viewpoint, there has been a steady improvement in how authors addressed issues of research quality in published qualitative case studies. Suggestions for changes in data presentation, reviewer expectations, the IMM reviewer feedback form, and the use of web-based appendices containing data pertinent to reader judgments of research quality are suggested.

1. Introduction

Industrial marketing research is characterized by the use of qualitative case studies to build theory (Dubois & Araujo, 2004, 2007; Easton, 2000; Harrison & Easton, 2004). The value of case studies to business marketing theory is recognized in editorial missions of all three-specialist business-to-business (B2B) marketing journals (IMM, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, and Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing). Researchers have employed case studies partly because the inherent flexibility of the method suits the study of the complex, evolving relationships and interactions in industrial markets (Dubois & Araujo, 2004).

However, the nature of case quality and its associated practices varies widely (Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Easton, 2000; Harrison & Easton, 2004). Several authors have noted the need for greater sensitivity to quality criteria in business marketing case research to avoid inappropriate practices (Hillebrand, Kok, & Biemans, 2001), including the preferencing of one type of design (multiple cases) over rich, single cases (Dubois & Araujo, 2007). As well, others, desiring greater pluralism in method, have called for greater sensitivity to the epistemological issues underpinning quality criteria in qualitative case research (Easton, 2000; Harrison & Easton, 2004). We respond to these calls (and that of the special issue) by conducting a longitudinal examination of how authors have addressed research quality in Industrial Marketing Management. Besides space considerations, we chose IMM because the journal is recognized as the leading journal in industrial marketing and is a top ten journal by influence within marketing over a thirty-year period (Baumgartner & Pieters, 2003). As such, IMM was judged to provide preeminent examples of case research within the sub-discipline of B2B marketing. We focus on qualitative case studies published between 1971 and 2006. Although sensitive to other traditions such as realism (Easton, 2000), interpretivism (Beverland, 2005) and postmodernism (Rinallo & Golletto, 2006), we focus on case quality from the dominant positivist viewpoint—a summary of case quality criteria from this standpoint is presented in Table 1.

We believe that addressing research quality is important for qualitative case researchers for at least six reasons. First, attention to quality is likely to lead to better practices in the field (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Second, being sensitive to how quality is addressed may result in richer insights and therefore better theory. Third, active debate over research quality is a sign of a healthy research community, and thus will improve the status of the method (Silverman, 2004a). Fourth, having explicit standards of quality will improve the legitimacy of case research, thus improving the status of the B2B field, and potentially increasing the impact of case research. Fifth, such debates can alleviate concerns raised by other researchers over the value of qualitative research (including cases) in marketing (Levy, 2005). Finally, having clear guidelines on how case quality can be addressed is essential for B2B doctoral candidates.

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2 For readability we will simply use the terms “case studies” or “cases” to refer to qualitative case studies, unless otherwise indicated in text. Although case studies can be wholly or partially quantitative, we limit our focus to published articles that focus on the reporting of non-numerical qualitative data. Those cases (such as single industry studies) using quantitative data address quality through standard tests for reliability and validity.

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2. Method

For the purposes of this article we define case studies as “an exploration of a “bounded system” [bounded by time and place] or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998 p. 61). Cases were identified in a number of ways. First, we conducted a keyword search (looking for the terms “case study” or “qualitative”). A typical example of this was “Its practical application is demonstrated through a case study in industrial engineering and construction” (Mühlbacher, Dreher, & Gabriel-Ritter, 1994, p. 287). Second, we read each article carefully in order to assess if the qualitative articles met the definition provided above and to see that case studies were in fact based primarily on qualitative data (we removed articles that were theoretical discussions of the case method (n = 3), purely quantitative cases (n = 16) and one case study that had been printed twice). Third, we read through each issue of IMM published between 1971 and 2006 to identify any case studies we may have missed. The final population consisted of 105 qualitative case studies. Trends in case publication vs. total number of articles and issues during the period 1971 2006 are covered in Fig. 1.

The analysis occurred in three phases. First, we analyzed explicit considerations of case quality (where available) in each article against positivist criteria. Second, given that relatively few researchers explicitly addressed research quality, we analyzed each case for evidence of quality-related practices. This process was done by both authors and involved two stages—within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). The first stage involved a careful reading of each individual article (within-case analysis). Following this both authors wrote memos on each article, identifying key issues and practices (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Cross-case analysis involved looking for patterns across time. We used four time-periods to guide our analysis: 1971–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, and 2000–2006 (feedback on our interpretation was given via departmental seminars, the guest editors and the two anonymous reviewers of this paper). These periods primarily revolve around the publication of seminal texts on qualitative research, while the first period (1971–1979) represented the founding years of the journal and an era when business researchers had few resources to guide them on qualitative research quality (even classics such as Glaser and Strauss (1967) provide little explicit guidance on quality). The second period coincided with the publication of a special issue on qualitative methodology in Administrative Science Quarterly (see Van Maanen, 1983 for review), which included several articles addressing case quality. As well, Yin and Miles and Huberman published their books on case studies in 1984. Other influential works including Sage’s Qualitative Research Series (e.g., Kirk & Miller, 1986; McCracken, 1988), Bonoma (1985), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1983) (among others) were also published during this period. Each of these provided expert guidance on conducting qualitative case research. As well, the so-called “epistemology wars” in marketing occurred during this period (Levy, 2005).

The third period coincided with the publication of three seminal articles on case research between 1989 and 1991 (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991), two editions of Strauss and Corbin’s sourcebook on qualitative research, Spiggle’s article on data analysis (1994), revised versions of the Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), Yin (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1994), and an increased acceptance of qualitative research in major marketing journals. The final period reflects several things—the diffusion of the aforementioned two decades of published work on conducting qualitative case research and addressing research quality, the widespread acceptance of qualitative research in marketing, and subsequent increase in trained doctoral candidates using qualitative methods.

3. Findings

It is important to bear several issues in mind when reading the findings section. Since our task involves critically analyzing others’

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct validity</th>
<th>To secure that correct operational measures have been established for the concepts that are being studied (Yin, 1994).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>To make sure that a causal relationship—certain conditions lead to other conditions—has been established. Internal validity is a concern of explanatory or causal case studies but not for exploratory or descriptive cases that do not attempt to make causal statements (Yin, 1994).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Demonstrating that the findings from a case study can be replicated if the case study procedures are followed (Yin, 1994).</td>
</tr>
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Operationalized through:

1. Triangulation through multiple sources of data or interviews.
2. Providing readers with a chain of evidence using cross-case tables or quotes from informants.
3. Allowing interviewees to review the draft case and give feedback.

1. Pattern matching through cross-case analysis.
2. Searching for negative cases, ruling out or accounting for alternative explanations.
3. Time series analysis


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3 Although we report on many of these cases directly, space considerations preclude from providing a full list. However, we are happy to provide this database should others desire it.

4 We recognize that the boundaries of these periods are “fuzzy” given the time for adoption and diffusion to occur and delays arising from the review process and publication schedules.
work we approached it with a degree of sensitivity. First, authors publishing case research in the 1970’s and early 1980’s had few guidelines to work from to address issues of quality, and often had to overcome substantial institutional prejudice. Second, it is possible that due to space considerations authors removed parts of the article that addressed issues of quality. For example, information that may have helped reviewers positively judge the article may have been removed prior to publication in order to reduce page space. Third, we are examining articles from a particular point of view—positivist standards of research quality. Thus, we are not stating that the article is unimportant, or poor quality per se. Fourth, we are also sensitive to the fact that authors must make choices in what they report, and that these choices will be determined by the aim of the article—thus an article focusing on building theory or exploring new practices may focus on this contribution rather possibly at the expense of methodological details. Therefore, when we use the terms “research quality” or “case quality” we use these terms to refer to the extent authors addressed the criteria in Table 1.

Table 2 provides a descriptive overview of the nature of the published cases in IMM and the extent and means of operationalizing case quality. In regards to issues of research quality, the results in Table 2 are, on the face of it, not encouraging. For example, just under half of all papers published explicitly justify their choice of method in terms of research questions, prior research, or direct appeals to the literature on qualitative research. Furthermore, fewer still address issues of research quality including issues of validity (22.8%), reliability (16.2%) and external validity/generalizability (23.8%) or their interpretivist equivalents. This lack of description of procedures makes replication difficult, thus undermining claims of reliability or dependability. Since judgments of validity have to be made primarily on careful analysis of the final article (i.e., quality must be demonstrated (as well as stated)), we analyzed each published case further to identify what practices authors actually used over four time-periods.

3.1. 1971–1979

Eight cases were published during this period. Typical of these published case studies is the lack of raw data presented to readers. Instead, data is often presented in summary form, with (in rare cases) some small snippets of text from informants or secondary sources used as a narrative device. For example:

“... a seasoned resin technologist cynically suggested that no further interviews were needed, but that merely a plot be made of pentacythritol consumption over the last few years and an “absolutely straight line be drawn right through to 1970 or 1975, according to which is desired.”... 1. Chemical Age, April 1961: when dyeing problems are solved polypropylene will find wide textile usage, quoting ICI spokesman.” (Kratschmar, 1972, p. 271)

These two investigations carried out within a week quickly established that: 1. The physicist’s estimates of outsiders usage of CMS equipment were too high; 2. That the type of service offered to potential users would be more costly than originally conceived. This was because a need was uncovered for advisory services for potential users...” (Cowell & Blois, 1977, p. 332)

Kratschmar (1972) examines the research process behind breakthrough products by drawing on the experiences of seven cases (all discussed separately). The direct quote from an informant is the only one used in the entire manuscript while the secondary source is one of just four reported. The first part of the passage provides supportive evidence for the main research aim—that projections for breakthrough product success are often simplistic. The second part provides evidence from secondary sources, reinforcing that desk research is a useful source to justify investments in breakthrough product development. Cowell and Blois (1977) examined the value of different research methods for predicting potential demand. The passage provided notes that demand projection is very difficult because buyers were uncertain of the value of the product offered. This passage (which is representative of the paper) provides little information by which readers can judge the veracity of this claim and therefore replicate these results.

Other practices used by authors of published case studies in the 1970s to enhance quality included providing the questions used by the interviewers (used in all cases dealing with interviews), providing feedback to informants (one case), carefully describing the nature of the industry in which the case was embedded (e.g., Parasuraman, 1978), and the nature of the firm in examples of single-case studies (all cases). Such techniques go some ways towards addressing validity, reliability, and generalizability, although the lack of access to informant passages and triangulation makes replication difficult because too little information is provided to allow one to understand why replications may fail. As well, little consideration was given to sampling (it was rare for the number of informants to be specified) and data analysis, with all but one paper identifying how data were analyzed—in this one case, reference was simply made to “common patterns” (Parasuraman, 1978, p. 240). Sampling decisions are viewed as one of the most critical issues in case research because specific cases are often selected for theoretical reasons (in contrast to random sampling whereby each “case” is interchangeable; Dubois & Araujo, 2004).

3.2. 1980–1989

Nine cases were published during this period. In regards to research quality these cases actually provided less information than those published between 1971 and 1979, even though suggested standards were beginning to emerge regarding the quality of business
case research (see Section 2). An analysis of these cases found that articles often provided little detail of the method used (only two did). As well, little information was provided on the sample or sampling decisions, the actual data gained, and little consideration of generalizability. In the case of articles relying solely on secondary data, no specifications were given about the source or number of documents used. The following passages provide characteristic examples:

“The process of negotiation, from two in-depth case studies involving Swedish firms and firms in India and Nigeria, are compared with the process involving two Swedish firms. Case I dealt with the negotiation process between Defibrator, a Swedish supplier of Pulp Mill and the Hindustan Paper Corporation (HPC) of India. Case II dealt with the negotiation process between two Swedish firms ASSI (Statensskogs Industrier), the buyer, and Sunds AB, the supplier. In Case III, the seller was Power; supplier of electric power system, and the buyer was a state enterprise, Tender Board (TB) in Nigeria.” (Ghauri, 1988, p. 49)

“The decision system analysis of this article was initiated by performing an in-depth interview with the person(s) involved in the buying process. The researcher then obtained a detailed description of the basic sequence of behaviors exhibited in procurement. The behaviors were “transcribed and then broken down into a sequence of short phases, each phase corresponding to a single task relevant statement.” ... These statements were assembled in flowchart form to summarize the whole process and to reveal any extraneous factor that may have affected the procurement process. A follow-up interview was conducted to insure the accuracy of the findings. The subject of this study is the purchasing process of creosote distribution poles.” (Wilson, 1984, p. 195)

The passage from Ghauri's (1988) article represents the total information provided regarding his study. He then identifies two variables that influenced business negotiation (background factors and atmosphere) and discusses these as his main findings, yet does not indicate in any way how these categories were derived. It is never clear how data for this case was gained, who it was gained from, how data were analyzed, and whether informants provided feedback on the methodology (in contrast, Wilson (1984) identified how she conducted follow-up interviews to check the accuracy of her interpretations). Issues of quality are compounded because the author provides no direct quotes from the informants (which would have been fascinating given the cross-cultural context of the study), and no detail about the nature of the companies and industry.

The passage from Wilson (1984) provides a number of details necessary to assist with quality judgments. First, it details the informant, the firm, the focus of the interview, method of analysis (including a reference to a previous paper detailing how to analyze information of this nature), and included a follow-up interview to check for accuracy of findings, although little information is provided about the firm, the industry, questions or coding, and the results of follow-up interviews. When coupled with a lack of informant quotes and no triangulation, it is difficult to really assess the overall quality of this case. A similar problem befalls Matthysssens and Faes’ (1985) multiple case studies—the description of the analysis, sampling decisions, and questions reflect the standards identified in Table 1, but the authors gain no direct insight into the data or triangulation procedures. In each case published across the two periods, the reader must place a lot of trust in the author’s interpretation of the data, but is also restricted in their ability to replicate and extend these findings because of the lack of detail about procedures and data.

On the positive side, there were isolated instances (i.e., these practices were used in isolation in different cases—no single case combined all these practices, and only one combined any of them) where authors provided access to analysis decisions (Matthysssens & Faes, 1985), direct quotes from informants (Reddy & Marvin, 1986), gained informant feedback and engaged in dialectical tacking (Wilson, 1984). Although, these “innovations” occurred in the first half of the decade, effectively this period reflected the fragmented nature of accepted practices in business and marketing research during this time.

3.3. 1990–1999

Twenty-seven cases were published during this period. As with the previous period, debate regarding quality in case research was intense in the business disciplines (see Section 2) and qualitative research began to make in-roads in major marketing journals. Furthermore, practical “how-to” books on qualitative methods and case research were widely available. During this period, more cases were published in IMM (see Fig. 1). Although, a handful of examples met all the criteria listed in Table 1, the overall trend of this decade was to continue from the previous period. For example, our analysis of the cases published during this period found that 59% provided no methodological details, 52% provided no details on secondary sources used, 67% did not use triangulation, 55% provided no justification for method, and 63% presented no raw data. Examples include:

“This article is based on longitudinal observations of 5 to 15 years of five new product cases dealing with small companies.” (Sarin & Kapur, 1990, p. 301)

“The case details and summary tables in the appendix help to illustrate a certain number of phenomena relative to the key accountization process.” (Pardo, Salle, & Spencer, 1995, p. 127)

The first passage represents the sum total of information given about a longitudinal, multiple case study in a critical area—new product failure. The article contains summarized interpretations of the failures of each case and the reasons as to why (presented as separate single–case subsections rather than in cross-case form). At no time do readers get a sense of the actual data gained, the experiences or views of any informants (assuming there were some), or any sense of triangulation. This makes it difficult to judge either validity or reliability. The second passage relates to a case study of adaptation in the telecommunications sector. Despite the claims of the author, no actual details of the case are ever provided in the appendix, the table consists only of summary information about the findings and no actual access to raw data is provided. Once again, readers are asked to place their trust in the validity of the researchers’ interpretation.

The above two passages are broadly representative of the majority of cases published during this period that lacked key information that would allow for judgments of research quality. One impression that readers could reasonably form from these cases is that data is being forced to fit preconceived theories (perhaps out of the mistaken application of statistical logic; Dubois & Araujo, 2007). Typical of many cases in this period was the existence of long introductions and literature reviews (in relation to the “Findings”) that proposed new models. The findings in these studies were then presented in summary form. For example:

“The following 22 success stories are drawn from a larger sample of contest case studies conducted by WTCA headquarters among NETWORK users during 1988–1990. In total, they illustrate well the marketing uses and advantages of NETWORK for prize-winning small firms on a variety of industrial sectors. Alcoholic beverages. A trading company posted an item in offers to sell offering “Alcoholic beverages—all types and brands.” They received more than 40 responses from all over the world.
According to WTCA’s last information, more than half of those had resulted in firm contacts. *Antifreeze.* Petroil Industries found Taroko Enterprises through NETWORK. This led to a sale by Petroil of 9000 gallons of antifreeze, a $57,000 transaction.” (Holden, 1991, p. 165)

The above passage is an example of how perceptions of “forcing” can arise. The author proposes that networking is important, and focuses on the benefits of an early online trading portal. The passage above contains all the information in the article regarding method.7 The following two parts of the passage are examples of how the cases are described—short summarized information that focuses on the main point of the article—the benefits of a certain computerized trading system. Similar problems affected other cases (e.g., Brennan & Turnbull, 1999; Ford & McDowell, 1999; Håkansson, Havila, & Pedersen, 1999; Loeser, 1999; Moller & Rajala, 1999).

However, throughout this period, authors did begin to report on practices associated with positivist views on research quality. Some provided substantial detail on how they conducted the study (questions and analysis) without providing direct access to the data (e.g., Mühlbacher et al., 1994; Roos, Veie, & Welch, 1992; Trondsen, 1996), while others provided direct access to data but provided little detail on method beyond the description of context (Low, 1997). Two cases provided not only explicit mentions of research quality but also demonstrated the use of these practices within their articles. The most complete article in terms of allowing an informed judgment of quality is Harker (1998). Harker’s article provides a direct link between his research questions and choice of method, a defined unit of analysis, a defined population and environmental and temporal context, a defined sample, clear descriptions of data sources, and detail on analysis and coding. Throughout the paper, the author regularly moves between interpretation and raw findings, allowing readers to assess the emerging interpretation for themselves. For example:

“...the attitude to business development can be assessed from the following statement: The continuing development of sales of casting to Japan, the United States, and Germany will be dependent upon future movements in exchange rates. At levels around US$0.80, little additional business will be achieved from these countries; however any drop to around US$0.75 will result in some significant orders. This view indicates a cost, price-taker, product oriented approach, rather than a market, demand-oriented approach of the successful businesses.” (Harker, 1998, p. 323)

The above passage is representative of how Harker builds his case. He starts with a short description of the firm’s attitude to business development. Harker does not tell you what the attitude actually is at first, but provides you with the informant’s statement, and then an interpretation, which when triangulated with information about the case and industry environment reinforces the point that certain firms are price sensitive because of their failure to invest in a market-orientation. This passage allows readers to do several things. First, the reader can interpret the data directly, thus allowing for replication and validity. Second, the reader can make up their own mind about the firm’s strategic stance rather than having to trust the author on the issue. Third, the reader can make a total judgment about the validity of the findings. In summary, this period could perhaps be seen as a transitional one as some authors started to adopt suggestions regarding research quality in their articles.

3.4. 2000–2006

Sixty-one cases were published during this time. The analysis supports the view that authors are more likely to address issues of quality, although more could be done to allow colleagues to make informed judgments about issues of validity, reliability and even generalizability. In summary, 62% justified their choice of method, 89% provided enough background case or industry detail to make judgments on the boundary conditions of findings, 72% provided sufficient detail about their methods, 36% provided detail about the questions asked and engaged in triangulation, 31% provided details about the analysis procedures, and 26% provided raw data.

Given the increase in the number of cases published during this period, the emerging issues in relation to quality were also more complex. As well as the issues covered in previous sections (evidence that would allow for judgments of quality), practical quality concerns arose in regards to presenting data from large samples of multiple case studies, the use of secondary data, and the relative importance of various quality methods.

First, in relation to issues of research quality, despite the increase in authors explicitly addressing the criteria listed in Table 1 (particularly some form of triangulation), many of the limitations identified in previous periods remained. For example:

“Secondary information in the form of company reports, product brochures and marketing literature was collected. These informed the researchers with background information on the companies, their size, activities, and involvement with larger customers. Company and industry web sites were visited before conducting interviews to establish how the companies viewed and presented themselves.” (Johnsen & Ford, 2006, p. 1008)

“To aid in data collection and ensure consistent interviewing procedures, we drafted an interview guideline rooted in our intention to explore key issues and problems of supplier involvement in NPD (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interviews lasted 30–60 min with the first part focusing on supplier involvement on the organizational level and the second part on the project level. The interviewer used follow-up questions to further explore constructs, patterns, interrelations, and particular situations of the firm, its collaboration with suppliers or the NPD project. Data recording involved transcriptions based on the interview guideline components” (Wagner & Hoegl, 2006, p. 938).

The two passages above provide adequate justification for the use of case methodology, background detail on the case(s), and some method detail. Yet, both passages, in the context of the total article, are problematic for positivists. In regards to the first passage, readers have little insight into the amount and quality of material. Although this form of reporting the use of background information is replicated in many cases (see Beverland, 2005; Beverland, Ewing, & Matanda, 2006; Beverland & Lockshin, 2003 for examples), in the context of this paper, little insight is gained into what type of companies were studied.

As well, further analysis of these articles, and those like it (articles that report the use of secondary documents but do not provide detail about them in the method section, or in the findings), revealed that although authors stated they engaged in triangulation, it is not clear how this was done in practice. For example:

“In terms of addressing the study’s validity, the issue of access is again central. Remenyi, Williams, Money, and Swartz (1998) for instance argue that validity results from gaining full access to the knowledge and meaning of the respondents. More rigorous tests of validity were addressed through the use of multiple sources of evidence and data triangulation—particularly in relation to subjective and controversial issues...” (Salonen, Gabrielson, & Al-Obadi, 2006, p. 745).

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7 Questions that immediately spring to mind include, “How large was the original sample from which these 22 cases were drawn?” and “What did the firms involved report about NETWORK and its benefits?”
“However, some of the actors involved in the two projects have also been interviewed. When this was not possible we have used reports written by these actors as well as internal project documents and memos from meetings with these actors to include their perspectives as well. Despite this, a limitation of our study is the predominant focus on the focal actor Alpha” (Windahl & Lakemond, 2006, p. 810).

The two passages above reflect further problems with the reporting of method, particularly when no access is provided to the data within the reported findings. The first passage explicitly tells the reader that validity has been addressed, although no raw data are provided to readers. As well, although the authors note triangulation was achieved through informant checking, there is little evidence of multiple sources of evidence in the article, again making it difficult to make an informed judgment about the study’s validity. The second article has similar problems. The four passages provided above reflect a common problem throughout many of the cases published between 2000 and 2006—although the reported methods sections are better on the whole than in previous periods, the lack of specificity in the reporting and the lack of reported evidence in the findings continues to hamper judgments of quality.

Throughout this period, the number of published multiple case studies also increased. Multiple cases give rise to unique reporting problems, particularly when sample sizes are large, because of the necessity to balance cross-case summaries with rich quotes (the first issue goes to theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the second to reliability and validity). In previous periods, authors focused more on cross-case information usually in the form of cross-case tables (e.g., Matthysens & Faes, 1985) and therefore the richness of individual cases was lost in favor of saturation (cf. Stake, 2005). An alternative practice was to simply present summaries of individual cases within articles and then analyze them in a separate section (e.g., Hyder & Eriksson, 2005). This approach may have been useful for small number of cases (2–3) but becomes unwieldy for larger samples, and also reduces readability. As well, some authors dropped cross-case tables and reported multiple quotes throughout the article (e.g., Alam, 2006; Beverland, 2005; Beverland & Lockshin 2003; Mason, Doyle, & Wong, 2006). This practice gives rise to concerns of theoretical saturation or anecdotalism (Silverman, 2004b) whereby readers may feel that authors selectively use quotes that support their contentions (even if these are not reflective of the wider dataset).

One way of overcoming this problem (which is used by the four cited authors above) is to provide a reference back to the case (through a label or code) and to try and report on as many different cases as possible within allowable page limits (an approach also used by many consumer researchers). This goes some way towards alleviating concerns over anecdotalism because it provides factual evidence of saturation within the article itself. Another means of balance is to provide cross-case tables with rich quotes. For example, Beverland et al. (2006) provide a cross-case summary table for their 12 cases of Chinese firms, and then interweave direct quotes through their supporting interpretation.

The above discussion is perhaps reflective of an emerging trend in published cases in IMM—concerns over presenting evidence. Although there were many cases that provided relatively little detail by which readers could make informed judgments of research quality, many authors did grapple with issues of quality both explicitly and implicitly. Presenting qualitative evidence and detail about a method is always done within a context of page limitations. As a result, authors may summarize steps in the method or cite well-known authors for support of methodological choices. As well, authors summarizing data from multiple interviews, or data sources, or cases, must make decisions about how much to present and in what form.

Thus, one further question that emerged from our analysis of cases published in 2000–2006 was whether all the information presented within an article is equal in regards to forming judgments of quality. For example, although some authors may provide details about method, explicitly address issues of reliability and validity and even provide interview guides and analysis steps, a lack of any rich quotes from the data limits the ability to make informed judgments about what the authors found (see for examples, Prevot & Spencer, 2006; Valk & Wynstra, 2005; Wouters, 2004) because quality in case research must be demonstrated as well as explicitly addressed through references to practices or authorities on method. Likewise, the provision of rich quotes from the data can alleviate concerns about a lack of specificity in the questions used and the analysis (because the link between raw data and the authors’ interpretation is demonstrated in text) (e.g., Johnsen & Ford, 2006; Karlsen, Silseth, Benito, & Welch, 2003).

4. Conclusions

Our findings suggest that (perhaps fittingly) from a positivist viewpoint there has been a steady improvement in how authors address research quality in qualitative cases. Although, it is unlikely that one dominant design will ever emerge, authors are attempting (within ever tighter page limits) to provide enough information for readers to judge quality, without diminishing the quality of the story. As well, the lack of one dominant design does not represent a weakness, but may be representative of a maturing of a sub-discipline open to alternate approaches. That said, authors operating within a positivist paradigm should continue to provide more information to readers regarding method, research design, and quality (especially given that IMM is a leading marketing publication for case research). As well as giving explicit attention to these issues, researchers operating within a positivist tradition should be sensitive to how quality is demonstrated in writing up. Specifically, readers need to get some first hand access to raw data, need to see triangulation being used, and negative case examples being explained.

Our paper also has limits and implications for future research. In regards to limitations, our findings are representative of B2B case research in one journal (IMM). Therefore, these results may not be representative of the field as a whole, and future research should examine case study practice across the various publication outlets for B2B research. Second, our findings are limited to an examination of materials published in final articles. We are well aware as authors that material necessary to convince reviewers and editors of the quality of a case research may be removed during the review process due to concerns about article length. However, if this does occur, we would caution against such a practice as such information is necessary for readers to make independent judgments of research quality. Furthermore, by taking a positivist stance we are aware that we may have judged articles against standards inconsistent with the original author(s) stance or intent, use standards that are rejected by interpretivists or realists.

In regards to future research, we suggest two further avenues. First, is our interpretation reliable? Although we have provided as much information as possible to allow readers to make an informed judgment about our conclusions we recognize that others may view the practices used (and the extent of use) differently. Thus we encourage other authors to examine our database and offer an alternative view. Second, building on the first point, it would be interesting to check the external validity of the cases carried out. This could be done using citation databases and identifying whether empirical testing of case findings has been done, or whether bodies of work have effectively replicated findings in the same or different settings with similar or different methods. Third, we suggest authors seek to publish edited anthologies of cases in business marketing. Such a practice is common in management where authors provide new researchers or doctoral students with examples of exemplary research and additional commentary on the positives and negatives of each article. Given the number of cases published in business marketing,
a similar approach would be useful in beginning a conversation about research quality in business marketing cases (following Brown's (2005) review of writing styles in marketing, or Frost and Stabilein's (1992) review of management research practice).

Finally, the findings have a number of implications for reviewers and for the IMM review process. In regards to issues of quality, reviewers need to have an understanding of different case research paradigms and the implications of each for how authors address research quality. In this regard the review form for IMM should be adjusted to allow reviewers to give ratings on these issues for (qualitative) case research (currently this feedback is only given to quantitative articles). As well, this requires reviewers to hold authors to account in one sense but also to be more sensitive to different approaches. For example, more positivistic-minded reviewers may prefer multiple case studies to a rich single case. However, multiple case studies are not the gold standard of case research and give rise to just as many problems (if not more) than rich single cases (Dubois & Araujo, 2004, 2007). And, editors and reviewers need to be sensitive to issues of article length (subject to concerns over contribution-length ratio). It is possible that details pertinent to reader assessments of research quality were cut from papers in order to reduce page space. Perhaps a website containing more appendices for qualitative case-based articles could be provided to address this issue.

References


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