Understanding challenges of qualitative research: rhetorical issues and reality traps

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of qualitative research in marketing and the challenges faced by researchers in justifying the need and the quality of interpretive research. The paper reviews the fluctuating trends in employing qualitative research to build marketing theories, and touches on the subject of paradigm shift in research approaches in marketing. It further reviews main rhetorical and practical challenges researchers face in qualitative inquiry in marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper discussing the role of qualitative research in marketing discipline and its challenges.

Findings – One of the main topics discussed in this paper is understanding the nature of qualitative research and its inherent weaknesses and how to overcome them. Some of the challenges highlighted in the paper include: contextually embedded findings, vague standards for data analysis, presentation of voluminous amount of qualitative data and theoretical criteria for judging the quality of studies. Insights from real-life experiences in conducting qualitative research in bank marketing reveal practical issues such as participant recruitment and engagement, ethical soundness, triangulation, and perpetual assurance of research quality.

Originality/value – The paper provides personal commentaries on the experiences of a researcher in conducting purely qualitative academic study in marketing. It offers insights into practical difficulties encountered when performing qualitative studies and offers a glimpse into solutions and alternatives incorporated by the researcher, which could be of use to aspiring marketing researchers.

Keywords Interpretivism, Qualitative research, Paradigm shift, Bank marketing, Marketing, Research methods

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

This paper discusses challenges new researchers commonly face when pursuing the path of qualitative research in their academic endeavors in the quickly evolving and versatile field of marketing. The paper addresses debate over a possible paradigm shift in research approaches in marketing and whether the tradition of qualitative research is revived in marketing studies (Hunt, 1994; Chung and Alagarantam, 2001; Milliken, 2001; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007).

The paper casts light on practical hindrances and challenges that researchers face when pursuing qualitative approaches in investigating contemporary phenomena in marketing and when justifying and defending the value of qualitative research. Paper reviews literature on building theories in marketing and challenges of qualitative
research in the field (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998; Carson et al., 2001; Gummesson, 2005; Black, 2006). It also provides first-hand insights on difficulties when conducting qualitative research, based on authors’ first-hand experiences. Insights are based on authors’ past efforts to use qualitative techniques in exploring the topics of relationship marketing, online communications and bank marketing (Kapoulas et al., 2002, 2004), and offer a glimpse into practical problems researchers encounter when pursuing qualitative path of generating knowledge.

How research in marketing evolved: the development of marketing theory

Infusing scientific values into marketing research

Some of the essential questions every new marketing researcher faces when embarking on the research journey are:

What defines the discipline of marketing? Is it a science? Is there such a thing as a marketing theory? How do different views on marketing ascribe various research approaches in the search for new knowledge in the field?

There is a large debate among academics over how marketing should be defined and how this designation determines the course of development of new theories in marketing (Hunt, 1994; De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998; Carson et al., 2001; Gummesson, 2005).

Despite its notable contributions in the form of new concepts and models in business studies, the marketing discipline is still regarded by some academics as merely a supplement to management theory (Gummesson, 2005). This lack of appreciation stems from different perceptions about the value of the research studies in the field and the quality of their findings and contributions.

Looking back at the history of marketing, it can be observed that first academic research efforts in the field were by nature inductive-statistical, favoring a descriptive approach to research, case-by-case analysis and positivist philosophy when investigating marketing processes and the “how to” of marketing practice (Jones and Monieson, 1990). Dominant belief among early academic marketing theoreticians was that “scientific principles and generalizations of business should be built up by observation and induction from widely gathered and carefully sifted facts” (Jones and Monieson, 1990, p. 107).

In the early years of the twentieth century, an idea was introduced to develop marketing into a “science of business” with “generalized rules of conduct based on law” and “summary statement of fact or a description of a tendency common to a class of things” (Jones and Monieson, 1990, p. 108). The idea was to introduce a “laboratory method” to marketing research, in order to approximate the quality of studies in marketing to those conducted in natural sciences by imposing similar scientific research approaches, methodologies and measures of quality (Jones and Monieson, 1990). This implied placing greater emphasis on the precision of statistical examinations, variable comparisons and generalizations in research (Jones and Monieson, 1990).

Marketing theory vs theories in marketing

In the 1960s and 1970s the discussion progressed to re-evaluate the very nature of marketing theory: its generalizability and universality, scientific validity and testability, and the degree of “abstraction” that would permit flexibility in defining marketing
concepts and focus on “various special cases in perspective” (Hunt, 1983, p. 11). The concerns were driven by growing criticism towards the quality of research in marketing, claiming that it often arrived only to marginal contributions to the marketing theory and offered few original theorizations and practical implications (Hunt, 1994). There was an urge to arrive to a single grand marketing theory, which would contain and explain a collection of marketing phenomena and prescribe specific methodical teachings, much like the positivist disciplines of economics and management sciences. However, a distinction made by Hunt (1983, p. 12) between “marketing science” and “explananda of marketing” brought to acknowledgment that while “theories in marketing” could be formulated to reflect dimensions of a number of fundamental market exchanges, “general theory of marketing” embracing all the forms and circumstances of exchanges would be unattainable due to versatility of phenomena in marketing and the complexity in their interconnectedness.

It was argued that marketing theory suffered from vagueness and ambiguity because research in the field was burdened by the urge to constantly scrutinize emerging concepts and models for validity and generalizability, rather than to judge their “conceptual development”, “speculative thought”, “imagination”, “representation” and usefulness to the development of marketing knowledge (Weick, 1989, p. 516). According to Hunt (1994), there was a long string of attempts to extend general laws of positivist sciences to the field of marketing, neglecting the uniqueness of marketing phenomena and their relevance solely to the marketing discipline. Such approach obstructed development of original contributions in the field and consequently made establishment of a single all-encompassing marketing theory a failure (Hunt, 1994).

However, a realization that a “grand” marketing theory was unattainable spurred demand for more imaginative approaches to theory-building that would allow greater flexibility in establishing original marketing constructs (Weick, 1989). As a result, academia advocated closer scrutiny to research in marketing and to the theories it proposed, but with greater emphasis on aspects such as originality, relevance and usefulness. According to Gummesson (2005, p. 310), the questions that marketing researchers should be truly worried about are:

Do we really come up with results of any impact? Do we offer anything novel that also has practical relevance? Do we make things happen? Do we even react when things happen or do we just follow the “research as usual” daily routine?[...] Is research methodology with its techniques mainly producing trivial and shallow results with little import?

This re-orientation possibly marked the rise of a new era of research in marketing.

**The everlasting dilemma of the “paradigm shift”**

As explained earlier, as marketing was evolving into a distinct discipline, academics acknowledged the need to focus on developing conceptual thoughts rather than to pursue purely scientific trial of marketing theorizations. However, a debate emerged over how pursuit for new and original knowledge in marketing should be performed in terms of research approaches and techniques.

Academics often make distinction between two major research paradigms which contributed to building marketing as an academic discipline: positivist paradigm (also known as traditionalist, scientific, objectivist, experimentalist, and quantitative) and interpretivist/phenomenological paradigm (commonly referred to as humanistic,
subjectivist and qualitative) (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Barker et al., 2001; Carson et al., 2001; Milliken, 2001). In an attempt to summarize the significance and contributions of these paradigms to the development of marketing school of thought, it is commonly understood that while the positivist paradigm advocated testing the assumptions about the knowledge on marketing variables, the interpretivist paradigm preceded search for multiple representations of the less recognized and/or yet to be defined concepts in marketing (Barker et al., 2001; Carson et al., 2001). However, this oversimplification of differences between the paradigms does not account for the complex dissimilarities in the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of each paradigm, embedded in their differential philosophical views on the world and the reality, relationships between the researcher and the subject, language used by the researcher, type of knowledge pursued and technicalities of methodologies adopted (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Barker et al., 2001; Black, 2006).

Paradigm interplay
Researchers in marketing are often pressured to adhere to one of the aforementioned paradigms. The problem occurs with the recognition that the adherence to either of the paradigms ultimately and inevitably influences the manner in which:

- research problem and questions are identified;
- research problem and questions are formulated and proposed for investigation; and
- research approaches and methodologies are selected (Rod, 2009).

Thus, the choice of paradigm inevitable influences the type of contributions researchers will arrive to.

One of the major discussions in contemporary marketing addresses how the adherence to these research paradigms modeled the discipline as we know it today (in terms of its contributions, research traditions and scope of themes investigated). More importantly, the debate arises as to whether there has been a dramatic shift in dominance of one research philosophy over another in the past years (Barker et al., 2001; Gummesson, 2005; Rod, 2009). The majority of well-known marketing principles, models and theorizations from the early and mid-twentieth century were results of positivist research and aimed to establish universally applicable rules and guidelines for generic strategies in marketing (Hunt, 1983; Chung and Algaratnam, 2001).

However, the second half of the twentieth century saw revival of the idea that research in marketing should investigate “how different world views impact the development of marketing thought” and should account for more diversity and flexibility in approaches so as to reflect on rapidly changing needs and demands of the modern consumer society (Chung and Alagaratnam, 2001, p. 225). Towards the end of the twentieth century there was a notable interest in reviving constructivism, relativism and subjectivism and interpretive research approaches in order to investigate new un-tackled phenomena in marketing and to define new concepts and variables (e.g. in the fields of online marketing, relationship marketing, consumer behavior, etc.) (Hunt, 1994; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007).

According to Hanson and Grimmer (2007), the shift towards interpretive stance was manifested through growing interest among researchers in using qualitative methods to explore contemporary issues in marketing (for instance, rising popularity
of focus group studies in marketing in the UK in the 1990s). Another sign of the impending change was the launch of specialized publications and journals in 1990s dedicated to publishing solely qualitative studies in marketing and discussing interpretivist approach in marketing research, such as Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal. As qualitative methodology and interpretive stance were increasingly gaining popularity in the twenty-first century among academics, a question started emerging about whether a paradigm shift was occurring on a larger scale, i.e. that of whether the interpretivist approach was to replace positivist as the dominant paradigm in marketing studies (Hunt, 1994; Hogg and Maclaran, 2008).

Considering the positivist approach was dominant for the greater part of marketing history, many academics questioned the weight of claims over the occurrence of a true dramatic shift in paradigms (Barker et al., 2001). On the rhetorical level, Hunt (1994) argued that the occurrence of paradigm shift in research in marketing would have been impossible since marketing as any other discipline could not have been built on a single paradigm foundation. According to Hunt (1994, p. 18): “In fact, marketing has historically been an extraordinarily open discipline, borrowing – often indiscriminately – methods, theories and concepts from everywhere.” Hunt (1994) argued that interpretive orientation and qualitative methodology simply received lesser acceptance among academia in the golden ages of marketing due to essentially misinterpreted philosophies of constructivism and relativism.

Examining evidence of paradigm shift
Chung and Alagarantam (2001) and Hanson and Grimmer (2007) attempted to clarify the debate over the paradigm shift by examining the volumes of quantitative versus qualitative academic publications over the years, and offered historical overview on the progression of research in marketing. According to Chung and Alagaratnam (2001), the 1970s decade was largely dominated by publications of studies conducted primarily with quantitative methodologies, statistical models, and positivist systematic techniques. During the 1980s, “representativeness”, “replication”, “generalization”, and universal principles were dominant themes in the marketing publications, but a noteworthy remark was made regarding the possibility of exploring the potential of the “alternative paradigm” for addressing less-generic and more eclectic marketing issues, such as consumer behavior (Chung and Alagaratnam, 2001). On the grand scale however, the 1980s view of marketing was merely sympathetic and tolerant to the introduction of interpretive approach in the marketing theory development (Chung and Alagaratnam, 2001). As argued by Chung and Alagaratnam (2001) a positivist approach still dominated research and its power was largely attributed to the preferences of journal editors, many of whom identified themselves with the positivist school of research and favored studies conducted in this philosophical manner, thus indirectly influencing the path of research in marketing of that decade.

In the 1990s, more radical criticism towards the uniformity and single-sided approach to research in marketing was voiced. Concerns emerged suggesting that the dominant positivist research was becoming “obsolete and dysfunctional” (Chung and Alagaratnam, 2001, p. 228) and even that “research that just pushed numbers around embarrassed us” (p. 230). Editors of academic marketing journals at that time urged the “need to learn about the alternatives to positivism” and have “more tolerance of new theoretical perspectives” (Chung and Alagaratnam, 2001, p. 229).
As these authors noted, in the late 1990s there was a notable increase in the publications of studies pursuing interpretivist approaches, mainly of qualitative studies in topics on relationship marketing, branding, and consumer behavior with a recognized need to acknowledge “the transient nature of marketing phenomena” and to act accordingly (p. 231). Nevertheless, despite seemingly shifting interest in research paradigms, the authors pessimistically concluded that: “It appears that the functionalist paradigm is still deeply entrenched in marketing academia” (Chung and Alagaratnam, 2001, p. 230).

Similar examination of the validity of claims about the paradigm shift in the marketing discipline was conducted by Hason and Grimmer (2007). Their research revealed that approximately a quarter of research papers published between 1993 and 2002 were dedicated to qualitative research (only a tenth of all papers were purely qualitative) with the remaining share belonging to quantitative studies (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). Such disproportion in methodologies and methods in marketing were attributed to three major factors:

1. historical influences of positivist research in the field and the belief that qualitative methods of inquiry were less “solid” than statistical hypothesis-testing approaches;
2. the power of positivist teaching in terms of publications and scientific recognition; and
3. the technical aspects of publication formats of academic journals and their limiting spaces for thorough explanation and justification often required by qualitative studies (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007).

Hanson and Grimmer (2007, p. 68) argued that: “It is more likely that qualitative research will become more quantitative in appearance rather than it will increase in importance”.

Nevertheless, there was a notable shift in the co-relation between the works containing purely qualitative research and the mix of qualitative and quantitative methods (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). Common motives for employing qualitative research in marketing referred to the quest for “more insight or a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation”, “exploration of experiences”, and “development of meaning” (commonly mentioned in the exemplary works by Carson et al., 2001; Kapoulas et al., 2002; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Hughes et al., 2007; Priporas and Poimenidis, 2008; Priporas and Vangelinos, 2008; Andronikidis and Lambrianidou, 2010; Priporas and Kamenidou, 2011). Hanson and Grimmer (2007) finally suggested that there was a scope for greater efforts in qualitative research in the future, arguing that technological advances in qualitative analysis were likely to contribute to greater rigor and objectivity of new marketing insights and could further encourage interpretive-fond researchers.

It is difficult to argue for the existence of the true paradigm shift in research approaches in marketing. However, the gates of the paradigm-shifting road of research in marketing should not be so easily closed and interpretivist qualitative research should not be discarded. It should be noted that the aforementioned studies were of evidently classical quantitative-statistical nature and had positivist inclinations as to how research should be valued. What these studies critically missed was to appraise the quality of knowledge that qualitative research introduced to the marketing discipline over the years: the originality of concepts identified, the comprehensive coverage
of the phenomena, the “wealth of problem statement” and the “imagination in theorizing” specific and concrete marketing practices (Weick, 1989; De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998).

Understanding the real nature of qualitative research and its challenges
Before discussing the challenges of interpretivist approach and qualitative studies in marketing, we feel it is important to provide a brief and honest reminder of the essential characteristics of the qualitative research.

Virtues of qualitative research
Qualitative research does not promise transparency or straightforward orderly fashion in tackling research problems in marketing studies (Gummesson, 2005). It does not provide researchers with a set of rules to be followed that could give the researcher a sense of comfortable security and a safety cushion against possible missteps on the road to knowledge (Barker et al., 2001; Carson et al., 2001). By relying on the “power of words and images” it does not offer the uniformity of meaning like numbers and equations; it is rather “a conscious search for meaning and understanding” (Gummesson, 2005, p. 311) and a quest for in-depth comprehension and awareness of the problems and phenomena (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998). Qualitative research is essentially of “diagnostic exploratory nature”, which makes it invaluable for the development of new conceptualizations in evolving disciplines such as marketing (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998, p. 8). It offers the possibility to tap into the sea of complex exchanges in marketing that can be:

[...] separated into bits and pieces, assigned to abstract dimensions, meanings, motivations, associations and emotions and finally integrated into one overall picture that can be used to guide the marketing policy of organizations (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998, p. 8).

The challenge, however, lies in the observation that in marketing “data are mostly hard to find, hard to define, and they are incomplete”, and most answers are not in the volumes of newly acquired data, but rather in their descriptive and explanatory powers (Gummesson, 2005, p. 311). Researchers embarking on the quest for new theories in marketing should acknowledge that: “Qualitative research is an approach rather than a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness derives from the nature of the social phenomena to be explored” (Morgan and Smircich, 1980, p. 491). According to Hogg and Maclaran (2008), in qualitative research knowledge is derived from the context-specific outlook on the examined phenomena, subjectivity to participants’ frames of reference, interpretations, and depiction of social experiences.

Analysis in qualitative research
Qualitative research also bears the challenge of accusations of being a manipulative approach that enables researchers to speculate on the meaning of data in the favour of personal agenda (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Of all the elements and processes of qualitative research in marketing, data analysis is considered to be the “Achilles' heel” and one of the most sensitive moments of qualitative research (Gummesson, 2005). However, according to Gummesson (2005), the very term “analysis” is not really applicable in qualitative research since it implies reliance on the pre-established formulas, processes and designs to the phenomena that are not even properly defined.
or sufficiently explored. As Morgan and Smircich (1980) noted, even quantitative research encounters the challenge of manipulative interpretation of statistical analysis outcomes, as they have to assign the meaning to the findings based on their own understanding of their connotation for the given measure, research moment and research subject.

**Narration in qualitative studies**

Furthermore, the challenge of qualitative research lies also in how to eloquently put into words the rich knowledge extracted from qualitative inquiry: “Simply put, how can words fully express the meaning inherent in our observations, personal interviews and pictures when so much of it is subtle, hidden and contextually bound?” (Black, 2006, p. 319). The effort to compress massive volumes of qualitative data into few lines of text that must be illustrative, descriptive, explanatory and theory-inducing all at once is the challenge qualitative researchers always encounter when making their findings presentable to audiences (Black, 2006). The problem of narration is one of the biggest trials in qualitative research (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). As Black (2006) noted, there is always a challenge to transform obtained insights into the shape of research findings, while being cautious at all times not to compromise the meaning of data and lose their specificity to the temptations of generalization.

**Assessing quality of research**

Finally, the assignment of validity and reliability to qualitative research findings has been a subject of numerous debates among academics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Although debate over measuring the value of qualitative research is outside the scope of this paper, we will briefly mention the common “traps” in this area. The difficulty of replicating qualitative research insights is often linked to the issue of reliability of qualitative research, and reliability test is the most vague area in qualitative studies (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998). The challenge of justifying the worth of qualitative research and the truthfulness of its findings has been somewhat tackled by the proposition to implement the criteria tailored specifically to the particularities of qualitative research. These alternative measures include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). De Ruyter and Scholl (1998) also suggested that reliability of qualitative research can be ensured through “systematic operation at the level of research design” – constant awareness and reference to the existing theoretical research models and concepts and detailed account of the research steps undertaken as a reference for future replication.

Beside these rhetorical challenges, researchers often encounter a range of other practical difficulties when conducting qualitative studies. We further review some of the practical challenges encountered when conducting qualitative research in marketing. They are largely based on authors’ real-life experiences and aim to provide useful insights for the researchers aspiring to pursue qualitative research.

**Traps in conducting qualitative research in practice: stories from studies in bank marketing**

**Qualitative research in bank marketing**

Interpretivist research paradigm and qualitative methodologies have been applied in numerous marketing domains, with special popularity among studies investigating
Marketing practices in financial services (bank marketing). Some of the examples of qualitative research efforts in this domain include studies by Kapoulas et al. (2002, 2004), O’Loughlin et al. (2004), Walsh et al. (2004), Argyriou et al. (2005), Howcroft et al. (2007), Hughes et al. (2007), Kelemen and Papasolomou (2007), Berg (2008), Branca (2008), Dawes Farquhar et al. (2008), Stone (2009), Eriksson and Soderberg (2010) and Gilal et al. (2011). Common rationale for interpretivist orientation in these studies was based on the desire to explore (at the time) less-known phenomena of relationship marketing, e-banking and online communications in depth, focusing on the particularities of context-bounded practices and seeking better understanding of these under-researched areas. The most preferred qualitative methods in these studies were comparative case studies and direct interviews, seeking to obtain rich and detailed insights on the studied phenomena (Kapoulas et al., 2002, 2004; O’Loughlin et al., 2004; Walsh et al., 2004; Argyriou et al., 2005; Hughes et al., 2007; Branca, 2008; Stone, 2009). Although each of these studies could undoubtedly offer interesting and valuable insights into the processes, reasoning and challenges of conducting qualitative research in the field of financial services marketing, the scope of this paper does not permit detailed analysis and projection of the experiences of these studies. Rather, we wish to provide a first-hand insight on the practical side of performing qualitative research by reflecting on personal experiences embedded in the work by Kapoulas et al. (2004, 2002) and Kapoulas (2003).

Practical challenges in qualitative research: examples
Kapoulas (2003, 2002) conducted qualitative research on the subject of relationship marketing and e-banking in the environment of electronic media networks. The author pursued multiple case study design by Eisenhardt (1989) for the purpose of understanding, exploring, and explaining the phenomenon of electronic relationship marketing. Its qualitative approach enabled the author to extend knowledge in this area by proposing a series of theoretical patterns that emerged gradually from the inductive mode of thinking. However, the qualitative methodology also presented the researcher with several challenges during the voyage towards new knowledge in marketing.

(i) Gaining access to the organization and key participants. According to Kapoulas (2003), one of the first difficulties when conducting qualitative research in practice was gaining access to the research participants and organizations and granting their collaboration for the conduct of interviews and case studies. The issues of organizations’ reservation and participants’ personal skepticism towards inductive, open-ended and interpretive approaches emerged, and were rooted in the fears over potential loss of competitive intelligence from participation in research (Kapoulas, 2003). As the author noted, this was an obstacle understandable to the researcher as the study was conducted in the industry with harsh rivalry for customer share, where new marketing strategies could make considerable differences for organization’s position in the market (Kapoulas, 2003). As observed by Gummesson (2005) and Hogg and Maclaran (2008), the qualitative research approach is valuable only when findings offer new, unique, original, rich, and vivid knowledge unattainable via other approaches. However, to achieve these intangible indications of research excellence, participants’ openness to in-depth discussions and eloquence in self-expression are required (Gummesson, 2005; Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). This proved to be challenging in qualitative research in bank marketing, considering participants’ fearful cautiousness in elaborations and constant awareness of the need to reflect philosophy of the organization they represent (Kapoulas, 2003).
(ii) Ethical concerns. These challenges were also tightly related to the particularities of ethical practices in qualitative research. The necessity of lengthy and in-depth explanations regarding research procedures sometimes produced adverse effect on participants’ openness to participate in interviews and case studies (Kapoulas, 2003). Researchers encountered challenge in defending ethical principles of qualitative methods and in reassuring participants of their purely academic and theoretical interests. As illustrated in the exemplary work by Kapoulas (2003, p. 175):

Gaining access to institutions was difficult and co-operation was only achieved after multiple reassurances of strict confidentiality. All the elites agreed to co-operate on the basis of personal and institutional anonymity.

Such challenges are common in qualitative research inquiry. They emerge due to inevitable inquisitiveness into organizational practices, the immediate presence for researchers in the processes of information gathering and reliance on participants’ personal insights and opinions (Gummesson, 2000; Wengraf, 2001; Silverman, 2004, 2005).

(iii) Keeping the pace in longitudinal study. Furthermore, interviews and case study methods were abundant in practical challenges for the researcher. These included interview time constraints, data confidentiality and also rapid changes within the staffing structures of participating organizations (Kapoulas, 2003). Based on the insights by Kapulas (2003), qualitative research following longitudinal approach of data collection and reflection must realize that organizations change over time, together with their staff and this inevitably affects the process of data collection and the quality of insights gained. According to Kapoulas (2003) the issue of staff changes within organizations introduced a range of unanticipated complexities for the researcher. As participants were not always available for the follow-up interviews and their new replacements were not always eager and open to research participation, again due to cautiousness over data confidentiality and potential leaks of competitive intelligence. Based on his experiences, Kapoulas’s (2003) solution in such situations in qualitative research was to reply on persistence and patience in convincing individuals to continue participation in the study, explaining data confidentiality policy and being flexible in incorporating new data collection techniques utilizing alternative data sources.

(iv) Incorporating online technologies. Following previous insights, the alternative data sources in this example of a qualitative study meant incorporating online communication technologies. Although seemingly a straightforward solution nowadays, incorporating online communications for the collection of qualitative data oftentimes can prove to be much more complex in practice (Kapoulas, 2003). Based on life experiences by Kapoulas (2003), while e-mail interviews were useful for the completion of case studies the implementation of qualitative open-ended online questionnaires addressing customer attitudes and feelings towards bank practices to obtain direct and original customer reasoning on his study’s issues, proved to be more challenging in practice. Questions of the method’s reliability and validity emerged, especially considering the lack of support at the time from similar research endeavors in the academic literature on bank marketing studies (Kapoulas, 2003). It proved difficult to ensure truthfulness of anonymously and impersonally obtained online data, and the researcher had to be very cautious over potentially biased content (Kapoulas, 2003). The challenge was also to ensure sufficient volume of data, as in reality the researcher could encounter a problem of low participation rate among his study’s group in filling out...
the online qualitative questionnaire. The structure of the online qualitative survey was one of the roots to this problem as it innately accounted for open-ended questionnaires that required time and effort from participants to be answered (Kapoulas, 2003). Furthermore, the deployment of the online qualitative survey was impeded by another problem in the form of online hacks, which eventually contributed to irreversible damages to the integrity of his method in practice (Kapoulas, 2003). Ultimately, the researcher acknowledged defeat in the battle to use the online qualitative survey as an alternative technique of data collection. However, the researcher did not lose faith in the qualitative approach and ultimately re-assembled the failed method into a more common and functional form of direct focus groups, which in the end led to success (Kapoulas, 2003).

(v) Quality checks. Real-life experiences by Kapoulas (2003) in conducting qualitative research also pointed to the necessity of assuring the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative studies from the very moment of research design inception. In his examples, this researcher advocated triangulation of methods to assure systematic “checks and balances” of research findings. This approach is strongly supported by the literature. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 267):

In effect, triangulation is a way to get to the findings in the first place – by seeing or hearing multiple instances of it from different sources by using different methods and by squaring the findings with other it needs to be squared with.

Incorporating several qualitative methods to explore research topic from multiple perspectives and settings (such as case studies, focus groups, interviews) not only enriched the pool of data but also served as cross-assessment to truthfulness of obtained insights and claims.

Finally, according to Kapoulas (2003), successful implementation of his qualitative study was also achieved by incorporating the goodness test for qualitative research by Marshall and Rossman (2006) (i.e. systematically addressing the 20 questions testing the integrity and quality of qualitative studies). This included providing evidence for statements of research questions, assumptions made, data collection and analysis that were conducted and conclusions as formulated. According to Kapoulas (2003, p. 141):

These questions were consulted on a regular basis prior to the data collection and during the analysis process; therefore, this not only enhanced the credibility of the study, but also dependability and confirmability.

Concluding remarks

The history of theories in marketing shows that as the discipline evolves, there is an interchange in research approaches and ideologies. The growth of their power and influence shifted over time, marking important milestones along the line of marketing evolution and symbolizing directions in which branches in marketing developed. While the positivist approach and quantitative methods undoubtedly helped test the truthfulness of observations and assumptions that emerged in marketing, the interpretivist outlook also contributed to gaining better understanding of the phenomena in building new theories and knowledge. The dominance and popularity of these paradigms interchanges depending on emerging interests in marketing, the agenda of researchers and trends.

It is difficult to predict whether currently rising interest in qualitative interpretive studies in marketing will become a steady norm in the future, how long the interest in qualitative studies will last and how soon before the academics declare a new paradigm
shift in favor of another epistemology to better suit questions that will emerge in future years in marketing. Perhaps rather than debating over the superiority of either of the research approaches and paradigms, the next step for researchers building knowledge in the marketing discipline would be to adhere to the evolutionary epistemology and the premise that inevitably all proposed theories in marketing will be tested in time for relevance, “falsifiability” and replication – a process that, much like the natural selection in nature, will discard the weak and outdated theories in favor of more plausible ones, thus helping to build empirical knowledge in the field (Robertshaw, 2007). Researchers should also be prepared for interpretivist, positivist and other research philosophies to continue to evolve, mutate and adapt over time in order to survive as grand ideas, which will consequently further influence the course of knowledge growth in marketing (Distin, 2005).

When it comes to research methodologies, it is pivotal for researchers to truly understand the nature and character of their inquiries and what kind of knowledge they opt to build, before adhering to a distinct methodology. Qualitative research faces numerous loopholes in justifying the value and significance of its contributions in academics. However, instead of being discarded as a compelling path to knowledge building, qualitative research should be understood better in all its imperfections and challenges. Acknowledging traps and difficulties should help in guiding new efforts in qualitative research achieve academic excellence and finding new arguments for building the tradition of qualitative research in marketing.

Lessons learned from this overview of practical experiences when driving on a bumpy road of qualitative research are that thorough preparations supported by theoretical insights are crucial in facing and overcoming challenges characteristic for qualitative inquiry (Kapoulas, 2003). Patience and persistence are key virtues authors of this paper would recommend new researchers to be armoured with when conquering the roads of qualitative research on the voyage of their interpretivist quest in marketing. We stress the importance of the need to employ versatile qualitative methods’ in research, e.g. triangulation, so as to provide evidence of credibility in new marketing knowledge. We also stress the need for perpetual rigorous consultations with criterion of the goodness of qualitative research in order to ensure high quality in undertaking qualitative studies. Finally, we advise marketing researchers to have strong determination and will-power for building knowledge through qualitative inquiry. This should be the key strategy for overcoming both rhetorical and practical challenges when pursuing qualitative research.

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**Further reading**


**About the authors**

Dr Alexandros Kapoulas joined the City College team in September 2007 as Lecturer in Marketing and shortly after that was appointed as Academic Director of Postgraduate Studies. Before joining City College he was the Division Leader of Business courses in North College, a partner college of the University of Huddersfield, UK. He has also been a part-time Lecturer for five years in the Derbyshire Business School, University of Derby, UK where he taught a marketing and management module. He won the best paper prize in the Financial Services Marketing stream at the Academy of Marketing Conference. Findings from his research have been published in the *International Journal of Bank Marketing* and the *Journal of Customer Behaviour*. His works were also presented and published at several conferences by the Academy of Marketing and EuroMed Conferences. Alexandros Kapoulas is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: akapoulas@city.academic.gr

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