

Nature and Role of Qualitative Market Research: An Alternative or a Complimentary Approach?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to carry out an extensive review of qualitative market research and quantitative market research and comprehensively compare and contrast similarities and differences between the two. An extensive study of the concepts and practices of qualitative market research and quantitative market research is carried out from the literature. The findings identified that both research methodologies are very distinct based on their goals and techniques. A triangulation approach combining the two can lead to synergy in the research process. Another area where a need for cross fertilization is highlighted is between academic and applied practices to narrow the academic research divide.

Keywords: market research processes, qualitative market research, quantitative market research, triangulation

Paper Submission Date : May 5, 2014; **Paper sent back for Revision :** July 2, 2014; **Paper Acceptance Date :** September 9, 2014

Since the last decade, the debate over the relative virtues of qualitative and quantitative techniques of research has gained momentum (Amaratunga, Baldry, Sarshar, & Newton, 2002). Looking back at the literature, it can be observed that little effort has been paid in exploring aspects of qualitative research, perhaps due to the propensity of people to apply quantitative methods (Miliken, 2001). There is now growing acceptability amongst marketers that qualitative research can significantly strengthen marketing efforts. As per Yin (1994), research is a situational variable. There is no single research approach suitable universally. However, qualitative techniques can be used to test the credibility of quantitative research (Cahill, 1996). In the field of management, and specifically in the marketing field, there is a strong suggestion amongst policy makers to use a mixed approach of research (Amaratunga et al., 2002 supported by Miliken, 2001). However, not much research is being done on strengthening of the integrated model of market research as a formal discipline (Harrison & Reilly, 2011).

This paper aims to provide an extensive review of and contrast between qualitative market research and quantitative market research to identify their similarities and differences. The study throws light on the underlying philosophical schools of thought, goals, evaluations, and integration of the two methodologies. In the dynamic and interdependent environment, only a single approach to study is not enough and offers many obstacles. Many complexities arise if there is a mismatch between the purpose of the study and the chosen approach. On integration, these complexities can tend to aggravate or simplify depending upon the situation. Studying the fundamental similarities and differences between both approaches could help in avoiding such a situation (Arora & Stoner, 2009). It could also open doors for future research opportunities in integrated qualitative market research and quantitative market research. The major points of distinction are summarized in the Table 1.

Origin/Evolution

Research is often distinguished between two major schools of thought which contributed in developing marketing as a formal discipline. They are positivism (also known as the traditional experimental method for testing

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Table 1. Structural Differences between Qualitative Market Research and Quantitative Market Research

Basis	Qualitative Market Research	Quantitative Market Research
Central Purpose	Discover phenomenon with general research objects	Test Hypotheses or specific research problem
Approach	Observe and Interpret	Measure and Test
Control	Conducted in natural settings	Conducted in controlled settings
Sampling	Small samples	Large samples
Data Collection	Unstructured; Open ended Using focus groups , depth interviews, etc.	Structured ; Closed questions using online or offline surveys.
Data Analysis	Content Analysis	Statistical Analysis
Flexibility	Able to change direction ; flexible	Rigid
Independence in Analysis	Researcher intimately involved. Results Subjective	Researcher independent. Results Objective
Reliability	Natural settings difficult to replicate	Reliable Results

hypotheses) and phenomenological, that is, interpretative science, which is humanistic, subjective, and naturalistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nancarrow, Barker, & Spackman 2001; Milliken, 2001). Based on these two schools of thought, research is broadly classified into quantitative and qualitative respectively.

Qualitative research finds its origin in the history of anthropology. Qualitative research involves deep observations of the situation in as much natural environment as possible and relates to human behaviour. Early marketing theorists were of the view that market research principles and paradigms should be built using wide data and deep observations. Thus, the early research efforts focused on descriptive and inductive approaches to carry out case by case analysis (Jones & Monieson, 1990). In contrast, quantitative research techniques grew out of the strong conviction of people in numbers. Quantitative market research is characterized by the assumption that every phenomenon can be expressed by facts and fundamental laws on which hypotheses can be based and tested experimentally. By the start of the twentieth century, there was a growing inclination towards developing marketing into a science of business with generalized rules of conduct. The basic intention was to apply scientific research approaches and measures using statistical precision and generalized models (Jones & Monieson, 1990).

Some researchers are of view that qualitative research techniques are being revived due to the limitations of the quantitative research techniques to provide clearer insights. Strauss and Corbin (1990) claimed that qualitative tools can give a detailed view of an issue that is difficult to explain through quantitative methods. Critics argued that marketing theory was being used to validate emerging concepts and models rather than to add to the development of marketing knowledge and its practical usefulness. This realization triggered the need for a more innovative and flexible market research model (Weick, 1989).

Goals

➡ **The Ultimate Goal:** The major aim of both qualitative and quantitative market research is to get deeper insights into the market environment for improving consumer satisfaction, developing new products, and gaining a competitive advantage (deRuyter & Scholl, 1998). Both qualitative research and quantitative market research are used extensively to gather information on new market developments and explore new areas of expansion.

➡ **Primary Goal:** Qualitative market research emphasizes on establishing a close contact with the participants under study and experiencing their social setting in order to attain a higher level of understanding amongst

observers. It, therefore, aims at understanding the issue from the point of view of a participant who is directly involved with the issue and not the researcher (Eldabi, Irani, Paul, & Love, 2002). Qualitative market research is not concerned with statistical precisions or measurements, but with a deep understanding of social realities in natural settings through extensive observational studies (Christy & Wood, 1999 ; Irani, Ezingear, Grieve, & Race, 1999 ; Weick, 1989). It is due to this focus on understanding through observation that most of the data collection methods involve face to face interaction with the participants in their natural settings. For example, depth interviews, focus groups, field notes, and so forth.

Unlike qualitative market research, quantitative market research focuses more on prediction and control. The positivist approach to research aims at building hypotheses using casual links and testing the same using fundamental laws and mathematical operations. This determination of a relationship between variables through hypotheses results in acceptance or rejection of the propositions. Thus, it is conclusive in nature (Eldabi et al., 2002).

Qualitative market research seeks to understand how a consumer perceives, interprets, and behaves in a particular way and crucially why (Malina, Hanne, & Selto, 2011). On the other hand, quantitative market research seeks to determine how much and how many customers are behaving in a particular way with respect to market size, market share, frequency of purchase, product awareness, and so on (Malhotra, 2007).

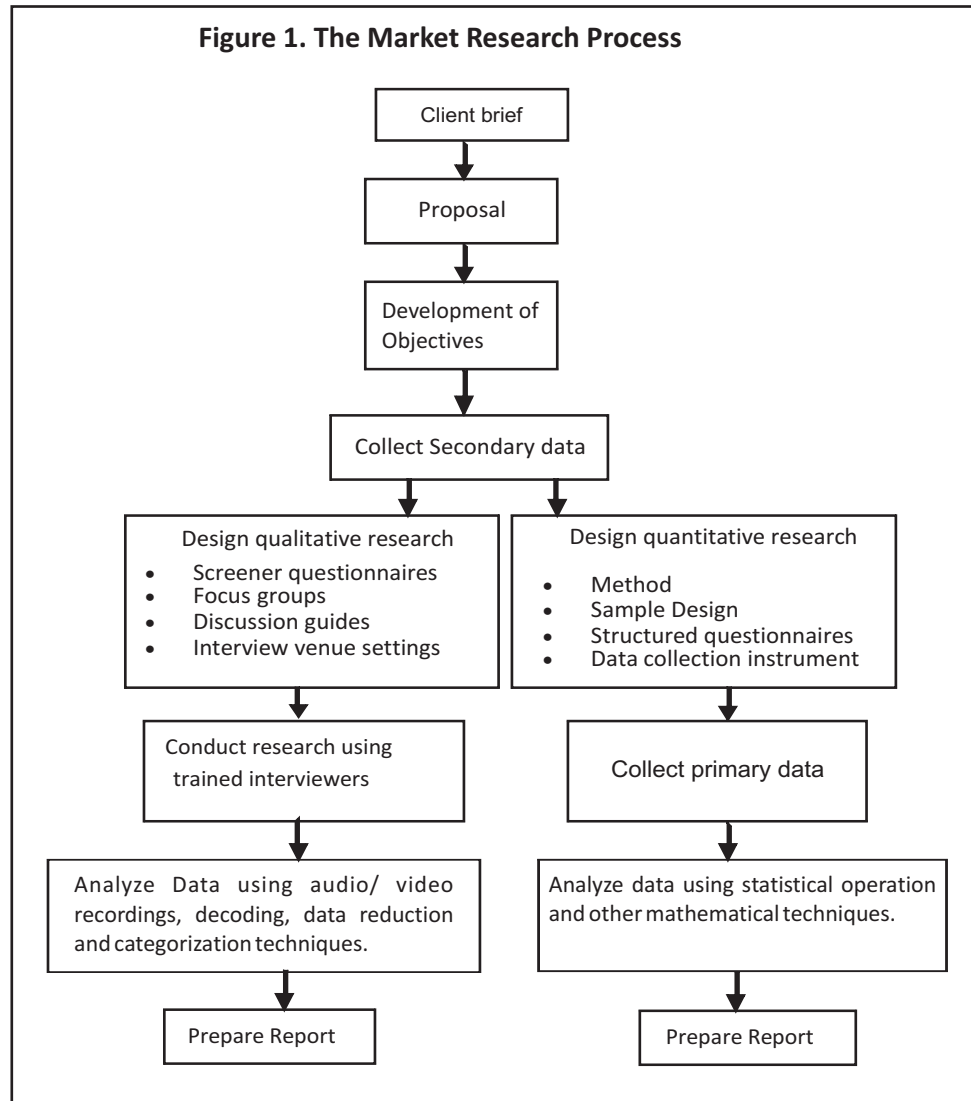
Process Methodology

Both qualitative market research and quantitative market research aim to gather information on new market developments in order to help organizations in decision making processes. Thus, the market research processes comprise of a common set of initial stages. The research structure then splits into qualitative and quantitative market research respectively based on the structural and methodological differences between the two (see Figure 1). These differences are as follows :

➤ **Sample Size:** Qualitative market research is, first of all, characterized by small samples, but those which constitute an exhaustive set of opinions (Amaratunga et al., 2001; Christy & Wood, 1999). A careful selection of participants is needed to make sure all possible views and opinions of consumers are incorporated (deRuyter & Scholl, 1998). Quantitative market research, on the other hand, involves large sample sizes. Since it involves statistical operations, sample size has a lot of significance in the analysis. However, it does not matter much in quantitative approach. The larger the sample size, the more reliable is the data. Also, while quantitative sample results can be generalized for the population at large, results from small qualitative samples do not generalize for the whole population, but for theory (deRuyter & Scholl, 1998). Thus, while a quantitative approach focuses on statistical generalizations, the qualitative approach focuses on analytical generalizations (Christy & Wood, 1999 ; Malina et al., 2011 ; Stenbacka, 2001 ; Yin, 1994).

➤ **Deductive vs Interpretive:** Development of the knowledge base can either be done using inductive or deductive methods. Qualitative market research uses an inductive approach at large as it starts with observing variables in hand and on the basis of them, establishes generalizations. Thus, it helps in generating theory as well as refuting a theory (Gummesson, 2005 ; Malina et al., 2011). On the other hand, deductive reasoning starts with a generalized theory and seeks to test its applicability on the phenomenon at hand. Quantitative approach is often criticized for its deductive nature. It is argued that quantitative deductivism makes researchers focus more on judging the suitability of current theories and data quality rather than discovering fresh theories.

➤ **Working :** Qualitative market research focuses on reasoning about consumer behaviour. The most commonly used qualitative market research techniques are focus groups and depth interviews. Both involve open-ended questions and face to face discussions in the presence of the observer under natural settings. They care less about statistical evidence, but are strongly influenced by researchers' personal judgement (Christy & Wood, 1999). The



studies are often audio or video recorded, and the dynamics of interaction are then analyzed by the moderator. Thus, data collection and data analysis go hand in hand and give a holistic picture as the researchers proceed. The direction of the discussion can easily be changed with respect to participant responses, thereby giving lots of room and flexibility to the researchers (deRuyter & Scholl, 1998).

Quantitative market research mostly involves structured closed-ended questions in the form of surveys or questionnaires from respondents which can either be conducted physically or by using a computer (questionnaires can be emailed to the prospective respondents). The numerical data so collected then goes through rigorous operating tools, and results are then expressed in the form of statistical reports and graphs.

Reliability/Validity

Finally, there have been many debates on the issue of validity and reliability of qualitative research amongst practitioners (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Kapoulas and Mitic (2012) identified many challenges related to qualitative research, of which reliability and validity form a major part. Reliability implies whether the same results are obtained when the research is applied over and over again. Qualitative market research settings cannot

be replicated as it is not possible to replicate the natural settings every time. The difficulty of replicating qualitative research insights often makes the reliability aspect the weakest area in qualitative studies. However, it was argued that by operating in a well structured and systematic interview or focus group setting, reliability can be warranted (deRuyter & Scholl, 1998). The authors also claimed that reliability can be attained by using accurate and well defined steps used in data collection and analysis. Yin (1994) also listed down criteria to be followed to establish reliability.

As per Gabriel (1990), validity issues cannot be easily answered. Validity questions enquire whether the research is producing well grounded results and measurements or not. Considering this definition, the question of validity does not arise in qualitative research as there is nothing literally to measure under an observational study (Stenbacka, 2001). However, according to Sykes (1991), validity of qualitative data can be established if one has a well defined purpose of the study and healthy respondents. Validity can be assured if the participants can connect with the problem in its natural setting. Validity is, therefore, achieved using strategically chosen participants and procedures (Stenbacka, 2001). In a quantitative approach, on the other hand, standardization tends to dilute the quality of information (Sykes, 1991).

Choosing the Right Approach

Amaratunga et al. (2002) and Yin (1994) described research methodology as a situational variable. Amaratunga et al. (2002) also emphasized on the choice of research on the basis of nature of study as well as on the researchers' own philosophies. Each approach has its own structure of data collection and interpretation and, therefore, has a specific suitability area based on its strengths and weaknesses. Yin (1994) emphasized on considering factors such as types of questions, control over participants, and dynamic changes in order to make a strategic choice. For instance, quantitative market research offers projections whereas qualitative market research does not offer predictable results. Qualitative market research, however, offers a higher understanding of how the target market relates to a product. When it comes to a strict scientific approach, quantitative methods are always preferred primarily because quantitative techniques can be suitably employed in hypotheses testing, while qualitative research is apt for generating new hypotheses (deRuyter & Scholl, 1998).

Qualitative market research is essentially exploratory in nature and is used to study new unfamiliar territories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Companies with well established products have a large historical database to refer to for studying trends. However, new emerging markets may not have access to such a database. In such cases, qualitative market research supersedes the latter. Even while using quantitative market research, it is preferable to complement it with qualitative analysis to validate, elaborate, or reinterpret the given issue and give it a more in-depth multidimensional insight (Amaratunga et al., 2002).

A suitable approach should be adopted after weighing both costs and benefits (Malina et al., 2011). As stated by Amaratunga et al. (2002), while some researchers find it intimidating to use statistics, it provides easy analysis. On the other hand, qualitative research might seem simple to start with, but it is as much difficult to analyze the data. For instance, the major constraints in using qualitative market research are the huge volume of data and the complexities in analysis (Richards & Richards, 1994).

Integration: Using a Mixed Research Approach

There is a strong inclination amongst researchers towards the use of both qualitative and quantitative market research in a complementary fashion. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies do not go in opposite directions; rather, they focus on the different aspects of the same phenomenon (Das, 1983; Gummesson, 2005). Strauss and Corbin (1990) claimed that qualitative research can give details of the phenomenon which quantitative research cannot describe. On the other hand, research by Zellman, Blake, and Abell (2010) showed how qualitative data could be validated by quantitative data for improved strategies. According to Yin (1994), the trend has developed with a strong emphasis on the use of triangulation in research, that is, combining the two approaches to describe the

unit under study in totality. Rossman and Wilson (1991) elaborated on the positive reasons for integrating the two approaches.

From the Figure 1, it can be seen that the reports prepared in the end by the two could collectively provide a more holistic view of the market situation than any one of the approaches individually. Stress is also laid on the importance of triangulation, so as to provide evidence of credibility research (Kapoulas & Mitic, 2012; Malina et al., 2011; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). The basic assumption says that both the approaches have respective strengths and weaknesses, and that using a mixed approach will compensate weaknesses and focus on each other's relevant strength (deRuyter & Scholl, 1998 ; Gordon & Langmaid, 1988 ; Gummesson, 2005; Jick, 1983 ; Nancarrow, Moskvina, & Shankar, 1996 ; Robson & Foster, 1989 ; Stainback & Stainback, 1988). Miles and Huberman (1984) claimed that the quantitative methodologists increasingly involved the interpretive approaches to complement empirical tests. Furthermore, it has been observed that more ethnographers and qualitative researchers are using structured models and frameworks when dealing with multiple areas. Thus, a combined research model will provide multidimensional insights into using graphical as well as behavioural data, which will be both reliable and verifiable.

Positioning in the Research Phase

The market research field regards qualitative research as more of a supplementary technique that precedes or succeeds quantitative methodology. Morgan and Krueger (1993) indicated that there exists a myth amongst researchers that qualitative techniques are to be used to pave way for the actual research. These opinions dilute the significance of qualitative research techniques in market research.

Difference between qualitative and quantitative research does not imply the superiority of one methodology over the other. Rather, these differences may make one methodology more useful in a certain situation than the other. Thus, both can be conducted at first depending on the requirements of the study at hand (Amaratunga et al., 2002 ; Catterall, 1998 ; Stainback & Stainback, 1988; Yin, 1994). Qualitative market research precedes when there is a question of discovery of a new concept or idea about which little is known beforehand so that the prevailing situation could be understood before getting on the measurement side. On the other hand, when sufficient previous information is at hand, then quantitative techniques can be applied at first to discover areas requiring further exploration. In general, those research methods should be adopted which best answer the research problem (Malina et al., 2011). Strauss and Corbin (1990) claimed that qualitative market research can be used to gather insights about little known phenomenon and also to interpret quantitative findings and reinforce their validity. Thus, in an integrated fashion, qualitative research shall be used both before and after the conclusive research process.

Writing Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Writing a market research report involves data analysis followed by actual writing. Both qualitative market research and quantitative market research are carried out on the same principle skills. However, there is a debate over the contribution of qualitative research to the development of knowledge due to lack of numerical evidence (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008). Also, two different participants may respond in an entirely different manner with respect to their opinions, body language, their background, and so on. Thus, writing a qualitative report poses several challenges in convincing the readers about the validity and reliability of the reports. There could be the following three types of reports depending on the needs of the clients as well as the time involved:

➤ **Brief Report :** This report is usually not more than 6-7 pages and serves clients who need immediate results, that is, within a couple of days. It focuses only on primary research findings.

➤ **Summary Report :** Summary reports are the most common type of qualitative market research reports. They are prepared to use the audio/video responses of the participants and are usually 30- 40 pages in length.

➤ **Full Report of Findings:** Full reports provide detailed findings. They provide an overall concrete picture. These are usually longer (more than 40 pages) and contain structured writing including table of content, executive summary, bibliography, and so forth. As per Stenius, Mäkelä, Miovisky, and Gabrhelik (2007), key distinctions in different sections of a qualitative research report are as follows:

➔ **Aim of the Study :** The study, as most of the studies, needs to start with the problem in hand. With qualitative research, however, there has to be a detailed account of the problem or the question. The explanation is needed for effective operations. It is not always easy to define a research problem. However, it is necessary to validate findings (Hogg & Maclaren, 2008).

➔ **Data Display :** Qualitative researchers make extensive use of visual tools to express the data in order to reduce or to summarize the long texts involved in the study. There are numerous ways to present data in qualitative analysis. Displays may be tables, or figures like flow charts, arrow diagrams, tree diagrams, circular paths, and consensus maps, which are used extensively.

➔ **Data Analysis Methods :** Both quantitative as well as qualitative market research involve concepts of classification and deduction. Quantitative analysis, however, is more clear-cut than qualitative analysis. There are well structured relationships and formulae for data analysis in quantitative market research. On the other hand, qualitative market researchers can give a description of the settings, background of the respondents, intervention techniques, and data processing procedures. The sorted out data is then placed in different categories, and observational arguments follow (Des Jarlais, Lyles, & Crepaz, 2004). According to Malina et al. (2011), qualitative researchers should disclose the complete procedure in detail so that the whole picture is evident to readers in the analysis.

➔ **Findings and Discussion :** There are concrete results in quantitative market research, while there are only findings in qualitative market research. The writer here tries to convince the logical validity of their findings with the support of previous works of researchers with respect to the authenticity of data collected, plausibility of data, criticality, and reflexivity (Baxter & Chua, 2008 ; Hogg & Maclaren, 2008).

➔ **Conclusions :** Here, the summary of the findings are presented and their potential application is discussed. There should also be a description of findings, limitations, and how the study reflects them (Des Jarlais et al., 2004). For instance, because of the sampling limitations, generalizing the findings for the whole population is impossible. However, the findings should aim at strengthening the theory.

Similarities and Differences Between Academicians' and Practitioners' Approach to Qualitative Research

There is an ongoing debate between the literature of market research academicians and qualitative market research practitioners over various aspects. Qualitative research faces numerous loopholes in justifying the value and significance of its contributions in academics (Kapoulas & Mitic, 2012). Practitioners find many of the academic theories of qualitative research irrelevant to the issues they face in practice and these theories are often difficult to understand (Ankers & Brennan, 2002 ; Baines, Brennan, Gill, & Mortimore, 2009 ; Catterall, 1998 ; Starkey & Madan, 2001). On the other hand, academicians complain to practitioners for not giving relevant value to their works. According to Pavia (2006), this divide is inherent in the way the two approaches move forward. Academic research focuses more on raising questions than answers for academic journals, while practitioners' main aim is to

bring solutions for their clients' problems (Baines et al., 2009; Keegan, Tinsan, & Nancarrow, 2008; Pavia, 2006). As per Southgate (2006), authors are required to have a complete command on theories of qualitative market research; practitioners' main requirement is to have a knowledge advantage over their industry counterparts in the dynamic market where trial and error is regarded as a good substitute for an in depth knowledge base. Additionally, academic articles are generally filled with technical jargon and complexities, limiting their general appeal (Crosier, 2004; Otteson & Gronhaug, 2004).

Both groups are not entirely different in the sense that both industry practitioners and academic colleagues share the common goal of defending the use of qualitative market research from the followers of quantitative methodologies. A practitioner too builds techniques and theories, but they are often less formal and articulated. They focus on gaining commercially through innovative techniques that give the clients a competitive advantage. Academics too has innovation as one of the key elements of research. Thus, innovation becomes a shared aspiration (Keegan et al., 2008).

The prime issue leading to the growing gap between academics and literature is the misapprehension of both the groups towards the usage of qualitative market research. Both perceive each other's work to be relevant only to their environment with little scope for joint projects (Baines et al., 2009). For instance, industry practitioners, by defining qualitative market research as opposite to the positivist approach, assume that it does not involve numbers or computerized analysis (Hedges & Robson, 1993). However, academicians emphasize that manipulation of data and computer softwares can provide valuable information (Silverman, 1993; Zellman et al., 2010). The Survey of Association of Qualitative Research revealed practitioners' reservations towards software programmes in support for qualitative market research as it was assumed to be a less subjective and time consuming technique for qualitative analysis. Such faulty conceptions lead to the vicious cycle of reinforcement by non use. Practitioners admitted that they would like to learn from academics in this area and add to their theoretical as well as practical knowledge (Maclaren & Catterall, 2002). In another survey by Baines et al. (2009), majority of the practitioners admitted to not knowing even a single marketing journal. Additionally, very few practitioners participated in academic conferences and vice versa (Keegan et al., 2008).

Another reason for the growing divide could be due to the qualitative market education being too limited. Only recently have some of the basic content of qualitative market research been included in the textbooks (Catterall, 1998). There are very few books that are more practitioner oriented, while many books are academic oriented. Moreover, only a very small percentage of practitioners read such books or journals (Keegan et al., 2008). According to Catterall (1998), academicians emphasize heavily on techniques of focus groups so much so that these have become synonymous with qualitative market research. Many regard it as a quick and affordable means of research. However, practitioners report that qualitative market research involves a lot of time and monetary resources in processing a huge pile of data collected through long durations of field work. This hugely contrasts with the quick and affordable reflection of qualitative research.

Over the years, academicians have focused on justifying qualitative market research. However, they lack knowledge of suitable research techniques required to deal with different questions in hand. For instance, practitioners emphasize on categorizing the focus groups further on the basis of their background and interventions. These techniques are acquired by practice and experience and thus practitioners have an edge here, and academicians can make use of their knowledge in their work. Thus, their integration is expected to bring synergies to research.

Conclusion

This paper brings to light the work done on qualitative market research and puts it in the same stature as that of quantitative market research. Qualitative market research and quantitative market research have evolved from different schools of thought, yet they have evolved to be working for the same purpose, that is, gathering market developments. Both approaches are distinct from both the academic and practical viewpoint. However, both add their respective contribution to the overall market research theory and practice in an effective manner. Recent

studies are increasingly inclining towards the integrated model of the two. This paper does not seek to conclude that the integrated model is the best one. However, a transfer of techniques to and from both qualitative market research and quantitative market research can be appropriate in most of the situations if used in a systematic manner giving due consideration to factors affecting both. Though it is not necessary to integrate both the approaches, it can be said that it is beneficial in most cases. Triangulation leads to better validity, reliability, and generalizability than either of the methodologies alone. In practical terms, however, integration of the two might lead to conflicts arising from different primary goals. When both the processes are integrated, it becomes necessary to treat both with equal repute and avoid overlapping or conflicting ideals.

The present paper also highlights issues between practitioners' approach and academicians' approach towards research both in qualitative and quantitative market scenario. Both academicians and practitioners aim at good quality research and have mutual respect for each other's work. However, sufficient evidence shows that they seldom engage in each other's environment. A cross fertilization of efforts of the two can add immensely to the available market research theory and practice

Implications

Although both are critical to the effective empirical investigation, choosing between the two methodologies is increasingly becoming a subject of debate. A clear comparison between their underlying features helps in avoiding complexities. Thus, emphasizing on both the approaches together could bring synergy to the research process. Also, the quick data processing methods of practitioners and their client handling expertise combined with the nation's churning intellectual capital can bring different but complementary perspectives to the task. This is possible through direct involvement through consultancies, conferences, and so forth or on a broader view through business education (which is more application oriented). These measures will add to the robustness of the overall market research strategy. The holistic study and extension of qualitative market research techniques and its combination with quantitative market techniques are particularly important, given their significant presence in the modern market research industry. By exploring its application scope in the field, managers and decision makers can gain useful insights into issues that encourage or hamper the adoption of qualitative market research.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

The systematic review process undertaken in this paper has its set of limitations. The study mainly suffers due to unobtainable texts and inaccessible databases owing to technical restrictions. While efforts have been made to include all research studies relevant to the research question and sub question, some may have been left unidentified due to poor key word processes in various data bases. Some studies were also left out due to budget constraints, which limited the review to a certain extent. There is also general lack of theories of qualitative market research in the Indian context. However, all the selected available databases were searched thoroughly to ensure that a clear picture could be represented. Also, the study at present includes a generalized view of both qualitative market research as well as quantitative market research and does not include situational analysis or comparison of different techniques of both the research formats. Doing so will provide a more extensive juxtaposition between the two.

This study can be further extended to case specific as well as technique specific qualitative research issues based on which some general propositions can be proposed. There is a need to view the concept of qualitative market research from an independent and holistic perspective. It requires critical analysis of different qualitative market case studies, qualitative market industry members, and qualitative market research techniques. Such expansion in the field of market research will lead to an effective integrated model for better alignment of both the approaches with the managerial problems in hand.

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