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EDITORIAL: A NEW DAWN FOR QUALITATIVE SERVICE RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This introduction to the special issue highlights the role of qualitative research in service research. We discuss what qualitative research is, what role it has in service research, and what interest, rigor, relevance, and richness mean for qualitative service research.

Design: The manuscript examines the most common qualitative research methods and discusses interest, rigor, relevance, and richness as key characteristics of qualitative research. The manuscripts in the special issue are introduced and categorized based on their contributions to service research.

Findings: The findings suggest that the amount of research using qualitative research methods has remained stable over the last 30 years. An increased focus on transparency and traceability is key for improving the perceived rigor of qualitative service research.

Originality: This special issue is the first explicitly devoted to the qualitative research methodology in service research. In particular, the issue seeks to contribute to a better use and application of qualitative research methodology.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Ethnography, Interviews, Case study research

INTRODUCTION

Service research has grown in size and importance over the last 30 years, developing from a subfield in marketing to a global, interdisciplinary research field. Since its launch in 1987, the *Journal of Services Marketing (JSM)* has provided a fresh perspective on service theory and practice. Reflecting on the history of the journal, Martin (2012, p. 3) noted that “*the journal has evolved as the field of services marketing has evolved—from many conceptual, ‘how to’ and idea articles to those more empirically-based and theory-driven.*” This suggests that the research methodology used in service research to address marketing problems evolved as the research field became more mature and marketing problems changed. But what research methodology is best suited to address present problems in service marketing?

Hansson and Grimmer (2007) identified the research methodologies used in three marketing journals between 1993 and 2002 and suggested that only 6.5% of the research was qualitative. They also concluded that this percentage has not changed over time. A relevant question, therefore, is: Is there a reason qualitative research is not used to a larger extent in marketing? Could it be that qualitative research does not follow the research tradition of marketing? Is the reason that qualitative data are unstructured and difficult to evaluate? Hair, Busch, and Ortinau (2008) argued that 90 percent of all data are unstructured (e.g. documents, tweets, photos, comments, and behavior). However, the development of new methods in qualitative research that enable researchers to analyze more information might change this situation. Therefore, is there a new dawn for qualitative research?

To strengthen the role of the *JSM* in making empirical and theoretical contributions, this special issue would like to highlight the role of qualitative research in service research. By ‘qualitative research,’ we mean scholarship that relies primarily on qualitative data and inductive theorizing; however, we recognize that much of the qualitative research in our

research field is deductive, which merits its own debate. In the following, we discuss what qualitative research is, what role it has in service research, and what interest, rigor, relevance, and richness mean for qualitative research. Then, we examine each of the contributions to this special issue to outline a path forward for authors interested in publishing excellent qualitative service research.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Bansal and Corley (2011) suggested that qualitative research is scholarship that relies primarily on qualitative data and inductive theorizing. Qualitative data refer to non-reduceable text, including words and visuals, that can be digitized, synthesized, and even counted once the data have been interpreted to discern patterns and insights (Bansal and Corley, 2011). Qualitative research surfaces new insights that can lead to development of new theoretical models and even new directions of research. When adopting qualitative research methods, scholars draw on observations from the data to introduce abstract knowledge. Inductive theorizing based on qualitative data is particularly appropriate in new or emerging empirical contexts, where existing research is relatively scarce. However, there are several different views of what qualitative research is and how it should be performed. Researchers (including interested readers and reviewers) might even confuse different kinds of research that seem similar because they use qualitative data, and these researchers may be disappointed if the resulting research does not match their understanding of what qualitative research is (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Alam (2005) noted that qualitative research in marketing is among the least understood and most criticized research methods today, often criticized more for how researchers have used them and less for flaws in their nature.

ALTERNATIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

A plethora of qualitative research methods are used in service research. The most common ones are interview studies and case studies; however, both ethnographies and search are

becoming more common. Highlighting that qualitative research is not one type of study, but that qualitative studies actually differ in their origin, assumptions, and activities, is key for performing and evaluating qualitative research. In the following, we will briefly discuss the most common qualitative research methods (see Table 1).

The most common qualitative research method in service research is interview studies. Most often, interview studies are performed as qualitative research with customers, using inductive reasoning to build theories. Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) argued that in-depth interviews can yield rich insights into phenomena of interest, providing detailed contextual information. McColl-Kennedy *et al.* (2012) used qualitative data from interviews and focus groups to identify what patients do and used their findings to develop cocreation practice styles among patients. Such reflective interviews (i.e. asking consumers to recall their experiences of activities) represent one kind of gathered data; others include archival records in the forms of diaries, journalistic reports, and other documentation of past events (Giesler and Thompson, 2016).

Case study research is often used to build and extend theories and to explore and better understand emerging phenomena in real-world settings (Barrat *et al.*, 2011). In service research, the cases most commonly investigated have been projects, organizations, and service ecosystems. Data collection in case studies is often dependent on interviews, with the analysis combining the design of the study and the use of multiple interviews for each case with other types of data. Each case in the analysis should initially be treated as an individual case, but could then be examined through comparisons with other cases. Such cross-case analyses are performed to learn more about the contextual variables related to cases, and the method supports the production of more generalizable theories (Merriam, 1988). A major reason for the popularity and relevance of theory-building in case studies is that theory-building bridges rich qualitative data and deductive research (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

In service research, several market-oriented ethnographies have focused on the behaviors of people constituting a market (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). The key advantage of ethnographic research is its closeness to the reality of the topic under investigation (Harris and Baron, 2004). Being present is the basis of ethnographic research, which can provide accounts of real-life problems and consumer behavior (Reyes, 2017). With the increased role of digitalization, which encourages customers to spend time online and share their opinions, experiences, and everyday activities, digital ethnographies, or netnographic research, have become valuable for theory development (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). This has also sparked a debate concerning ethics for digital ethnographic research, and what researchers are allowed to do with such data depends on the ethics laws of the location(s) the data are collected and analyzed.

Action research is a research approach that aims to both take action and create knowledge about that action (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2002). Action research is characterized by close, continuous collaboration between the research system and the practice system (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). The research system is driven by questions originating in explicit or implicit theories developed in previous research, while the practice system is driven by problems originating in practice (Gummesson, 2000). A researcher's degree of participation may shift, but ideally, the researcher becomes a co-researcher with the practitioners, and responsibility for the project is shared equally among all participants (Perry and Gummesson, 2004).

As seen in Table 1, these four qualitative research methods are based on different assumptions and have different ways of collecting analyzing data. The goal is not to make these different methods more similar, but to understand their differences and use each method when it is best suited to solve an interesting problem in marketing research.

Table 1: An overview of common methods for qualitative service research

| Dimensions | Interview studies | Case studies | Ethnography | Action research |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Description | “Interviews are generally used [...]in collecting ‘facts’, or gaining insights into or understanding of opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviours, or predictions” (Rowley, 2012, p. 261) | “An empirical research that primarily uses contextually rich data from bounded real-world settings to investigate a focused phenomenon” (Barrat, Choi and Li, 2011, p. 329) | “An ethnographic focus on the behavior of people constituting a market for a product or service” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484) | “[A] kind of approach to studying social reality without separating (while distinguishing) fact from value; they require a practitioner of science who is not only an engaged participant, but also incorporates the perspective of the critical and analytical observer” (Riordan, 1995, p. 10) |
| Data collection | Interviews | Interviews, focus groups, meetings, documents | Participation observation, interviews, discussions, diaries | Active participation |
| Study object | Customers, Employees | Organizations, Projects | Customers, Citizens | Organizations, Projects |
| Theorizing | Inductive/Deductive | Inductive/Deductive | Inductive | Inductive |
| Application in Service Research | Service encounter, customer experience, employee behavior | Service infusion, New Service Development, Service innovation | Social services, Sharing economy, consumer cultures | Transformative service research, Healthcare |
| Examples | McColl-Kennedy <i>et al.</i> (2012) | Neu and Brown (2005) | Hill (2002) | Elg <i>et al.</i> (2012) |

WHY IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH SCARCE?

In this special issue, Valtakoski (2020) confirms that the share of qualitative research in the *Journal of Services Marketing* is approximately 7.5% and that this share only has increased slightly over time. This finding supports previous research on the shares of

qualitative research in the *European Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing*, and *JSM*, which have consistently been between 5 and 10% of published research (Hansson and Grimmer, 2007). It is possible to argue that marketing as a field is relying too much on a single paradigm (logical positivism) and has developed certain inherent methods biases (Deshpande, 1983), which may result in the development of new theoretical contributions using methodologies more appropriate for deduction than induction. These, however, are possible shortcomings that we cannot influence in the short term. Instead, we would like to highlight aspects of qualitative research that can be improved to increase success in the publication process.

Not Enough Data. A key question is how much data are needed to write a good qualitative manuscript in service research. There is no specific number of interviews or cases that is “right.” Instead, the right amount of data depends on the research question and how rich the data are. However, based on experience as editors and reviewers, when researchers try to describe results, their manuscripts often lack the necessary richness. For instance, when trying to identify categories of patients, customers, firms, and so on, a sufficient number of cases is necessary to make meaningful categories. In addition, a researcher must ask: How many interviews does one need to understand and analyze a case? Again, there is no definite number; however, quite often, one reads a case description that does not fully capture the complexities of the case or, even worse, relies too much on secondhand data from webpages, anecdotes, and hearsay.

Though it has been suggested that a researcher should try to achieve saturation of information, this is very difficult to achieve. In fact, Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that there will always be potential for new information. Researchers should be more concerned with reaching the point where the new information does not necessarily add anything to the overall story, model, theory, or framework. Although defining an exact target number is

difficult, it may be useful to understand the norm in the field. Mason (2010) found that sample sizes in qualitative research for doctoral projects range from 15 to 95, with a mean of 31.

These numbers suggest two things: (1) that there are no strict guidelines regarding the number of cases needed to get published and (2) that data quality and richness of data are key to get published. To add a sense of validity, researchers must estimate the richness of the data. Data richness is derived from a detailed description, and not the number of times something is stated. However, in order to convince a reader that a researcher has achieved the necessary richness, researchers often point to the amount of information collected, the length of the interviews and the number of pages of transcribed text analyzed.

Not Enough Details. The credibility of qualitative research lies in attention to detail concerning both the methodology and the actual results. Regarding the methodology, research papers sometimes lack sufficient detail on when data were collected, how they were collected, when they were collected, how the respondents were chosen, and what characteristics they possessed that made them suitable. Regarding the results, details in qualitative research can often be illustrated by narratives and quotes from respondents. Quotes are often key in providing readers enough details to understand the story and the contribution. Quotes illustrate that what a researcher has said is true and foster identification with study participants by communicating their points of view (Sandelowski, 1994). More importantly, researchers must know the specific purpose each quote satisfies. Having numerous quotes does not automatically imply sufficient detail. Common mistakes beyond including too few quotes are including quotes for the sake of “having many quotes” and including too many quotations that represent only one idea,

Not Describing the Analysis. Think of a manuscript with 1000 pages of transcribed interview material, and then think about how the authors analyzed that material. Quite often, descriptions of this analysis are short, perhaps mentioning words like themes, sub-themes,

topics, and so forth. Many descriptions of analyses mention “a methodology inspired by a grounded-theory approach,” often followed by a lack of details on exactly what was done. Even in published research, there is often a lack of transparency in what was done and why. With the increased opportunity for today’s scholars to use appendices and web appendices, we see no reason to not provide more details on these issues. In one of our own papers (Forkmann *et al.*, 2017), the online appendix providing more details on the research methodology is 29 pages. This improves the transparency of the research and enables readers to grasp how the large number of interviews were analyzed.

Not Enough Contribution. The most common reason for getting rejected from a journal is a lack of contribution. Performing a qualitative research study requires a lot of effort, and it is important to consider the choice of research question, cases and respondents. To make a theoretical contribution, it is preferable to investigate qualitative changes in the boundaries of a theory, rather than mere quantitative expansions (Whetten, 1989). This suggests that, when evaluating the contribution, an author needs to ask what, how, and why questions more than who, when, and where questions. From experience, we know that the editor and reviewers will ask *What is new?*, *So what?*, and *Who cares?* about the contribution of the manuscript. Too often the answers are *Not enough*, *Nothing will change*, and *No one*, and the manuscript is never published.

INTEREST, RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RICHNESS

In this section, we discuss four characteristics of qualitative research: interest, rigor, relevance, and richness. We argue that these characteristics are important for performing and publishing excellent research in service marketing. However, what is meant by interest, rigor, relevance, and richness can vary amongst scholars, with the terms meaning different things to different people.

It has to be interesting. Unfortunately, much research is simply not interesting for anyone beyond the author. An interesting research paper is one that the reader cannot put down before he or she has read it all—one that makes readers wish *they* had written it. Zaltmann *et al.* (1982, p. 27) defined *interesting* more strictly, suggesting that an interesting theory is “*one that both challenges existing assumptions and that, if it were true, would cause many people to change much of their thinking or behavior.*” To be interesting, a theory should (1) capture attention by appealing to a consciousness beyond how people operate on a daily basis; (2) be of practical importance and answer such questions as *So what?*, *Who cares?*, and *Why bother?*; and (3) challenge firmly held assumptions.

It has to be rigorous. Rigor in academic research refers to “*demonstrating a soundness regarding its theoretical and conceptual development, its methodological design and execution, its interpretation of findings, and its use of these findings in extending theory or developing new theory*” (Zmud, 1996, p. xxxvii). Failure to preserve methodological rigor may lead to wrong empirical results and theoretical inferences, compromising our ability to develop knowledge and inform managers (Finnegan *et al.*, 2016). In qualitative research, rigor can be demonstrated through transparency, which requires that researchers supply an audit trail outlining what they did, how they did it, and why they did it (including the researchers’ reflexive position). Rigor can also be captured through the authentic representation of the full range of participants’ perspectives in the research process and the coherency and fit of interpretations for the context (Reyes, 2017; Tuval-Mashiach, 2017).

It has to be relevant. Service research started as a research field that was heavy on managerial relevance. In her article “Breaking Free from Product Marketing,” Lynn Shostack (1977, p. 80) wrote:

The fact remains that service marketers are in urgent need of concepts and priorities that are relevant to their actual experience and needs, and that marketing has failed in evolving to meet that demand.

Managerial relevance can be understood as the extent to which research focuses on factors that managers can influence and examines effects of interest to managers (Varadarajan, 2003). *Service research has been successful in picking up emerging and relevant topics; however, it often lacks a clear emphasis on rigor* (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2016). As an example, the research stream on servitization initiated by Oliva and Kallenberg (2003) and Neu and Brown (2005) scores high on managerial relevance. Following a multiple case study approach, these studies sought to understand and describe the phenomenon of service businesses in the manufacturing sector. However, several early studies did not.

It has to be rich. The context of service is rich, and it is not always easy to grasp what activities and interactions are important. Capturing service through qualitative research means having rich data, but data are incomplete and hard to find and define. Having access to an overwhelming richness of data is positive *per se*, but raises difficulties related to analysis. The richness and depth of qualitative findings depend on the quality of the sources from which the analysis is drawn. Researchers must both reduce complexity to identify patterns and use tables and figures to show how rich the data actually are. However, the criteria of richness can be fulfilled in ways beyond massive amounts of text. There can be richness in methods (e.g. using a combination of interviews and observations, focus groups, and text from online forums) or theoretical perspectives (i.e. using multiple lenses and see what can be learned from data using different perspectives).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue consists of ten manuscripts that address qualitative research methods in service research and that intend to make a methodological contribution to the field. The

manuscripts can be grouped into four areas: (1) qualitative research in *JSM*, (2) emerging qualitative research methods, (3) ethnographic service research, and (4) reflections on the use of qualitative service research. In the following, we will examine the individual contributions.

The first article in this special issue, titled “The evolution and impact of qualitative research in *Journal of Services Marketing*,” uses bibliometric methods to describe the methodological evolution of research published in the *JSM* from 1987 to 2017. In particular, the results reveal that qualitative research methods have remained relatively rarely used (7.5% qualitative articles, 13.4% mixed methods). However, the variety of research methods has recently increased, suggesting a better fit between research method and research problem. The *JSM* has a specific methodological profile that is appreciated by its readers, with considerable differences in methodological approach dependent on the research topic.

The second article in this special issue, titled “Commentary: Exposing a research bias or a relic of research practice,” discusses the role of research methodology in the *JSM* and shows that, even though most of the research *JSM* publishes is quantitative, qualitative research has a higher acceptance rate. This article, written by the editors of the *JSM*, concludes that the choice of research methodology is not the key question; rather, researchers are expected to adhere to research methods that offer rigor in data analysis, regardless of whether the data are quantitative or qualitative in nature.

The third article in this special issue, titled “Text Mining Analysis Roadmap (TMAR) for service research,” provides a methodology for conducting text analyses of large amounts of textual data. It begins by reviewing existing studies using text analysis in service research and continues by laying out a six-staged best practice for text analysis. In each stage, the authors (1) articulate the aim, (2) provide a guiding question, (3) identify a range of techniques, and (4) use illustrative examples. The article demonstrates the usefulness of

employing text mining techniques to examine the ever-growing volume of qualitative data in service research and can be used by researchers with vast quantities of qualitative data.

The fourth article in this special issue, titled “Exploring the ZMET methodology in services marketing,” investigates how to use pictures in service research. In particular, the authors investigate a qualitative image-based method called the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET). The ZMET is a commercial qualitative projective technique using images and photos to aid discussion in interviews that has been increasingly employed in research. The article begins by reviewing existing service research using images and continues by providing a description of the four stages of the ZMET process, together with empirical illustrations of how images can be used in interviews.

The fifth article in this special issue, titled “Design fiction diegetic prototyping: A research framework for visualizing service innovations,” develops a design fiction diegetic prototyping methodology and research framework for investigating service innovations based on emerging technologies. The Design Fiction Diegetic Prototype Framework is based on six stages and seeks to provide guidelines on how to undertake research examining service innovations by combining multiple research disciplines. The authors provide an overview of the critical issues researchers need to consider to do action research on service design and service innovation.

The sixth article in this special issue, titled “Increasing rigor and relevance in service research through ethnography,” discusses how ethnography can be used to increase the rigor and relevance of service research. In particular, the author discusses three ethnographic aspects that can increase the rigor of qualitative research: 1) fieldwork, 2) prolonged time in the field, and 3) sensitivity to language and cultural codes. The author further argues that ethnographic research’s traits of flexibility and reflexivity can improve relevance. As such, the article provides avenues for making stronger qualitative research studies and publications.

The seventh article in this special issue, titled “Opportunities for ethnographic methodologies in B2B service research” addresses how ethnographic studies can be used in research on business-to-business (B2B) services. The authors argue that ethnographic methodologies are rarely used in B2B service research, but that it has significant potential in addressing the social and cultural aspects of B2B services. The authors highlight the potential, suggest areas for application, and encourage B2B service researchers to use more ethnographic research approaches.

The eighth article in this special issue, titled “Service action research—A review and guidelines,” reviews research studies using action research to study service. It posits that a service action research project must consider four elements: problem identification, theorization, the creation of guiding concepts, and intervention. It also criticizes the methodological discussion of action research and provides guidelines for enhancing research quality by discussing the criteria, meaning, and key choices of service action research.

The ninth article in this special issue, titled “Ten lessons for qualitative transformative service researchers,” shares the authors’ experiences of performing qualitative research. In particular, the authors reflect on ten areas critical for qualitative researchers in general and researchers doing transformative service research (TSR) in particular: (1) displaying ethics in conducting and presenting qualitative TSR; (2) preparing for and understanding the research context; (3) considering design, mechanics, and technical elements; (4) being participant-centric; (5) co-creating meaning with participants; (6) seeking/utilizing diverse types of data; (7) analyzing data in an iterative fashion; (8) including/respecting multiple perspectives; (9) presenting evidence in innovative ways; and (10) looking inward at every stage of the research process. The ten lessons provide guidance on issues to consider and prepare for when doing qualitative service research.

The tenth article in this special issue, titled “Publishing qualitative research,” concerns what individual researchers can do to improve their research and manuscripts. In particular, it discusses what activities to do to improve the relevance, rigor, integrity, narration, and impact of research articles. This final article ends the discussion on qualitative research in this special issue by addressing such key questions as research ethics and how to respond to reviewers in the review process.

DISCUSSION

This special issue attempts to initiate a discussion if there is a new dawn for qualitative service research. We do not necessarily say there should be more or less qualitative service research, but argue that the qualitative service research that is performed is evaluated based on its own merits. It is not the research methodology that decides whether a manuscript is cited or not, but using the wrong methodology to address a particular research question can kill the best research idea.

There is a discussion suggesting that qualitative research is facing pressure to mimic quantitative research. Cornelissen (2017) argued that qualitative studies are increasingly being fashioned in the image of quantitative research, following a style of theorizing that has typically belonged to quantitative methods. While this approach fits some qualitative research methods, it does not fit other types of qualitative research. Instead of streamlining the types of qualitative research that get published, we need to increase the diversity of research methods. Due to increasing specialization in research methods, reviewers tend to be more skeptical of research based on methods outside their core competences and training, increasing the demand on editors to have the courage to accept research building on novel and exciting research methods. This does not mean that we should allow research lacking rigor; rather, novel research methods should be evaluated based on the right requirements and standards.

Both Runfola *et al.* (2017) and Beverland and Lindgreen (2010) reviewed research based on case studies in organizational science and industrial marketing and found that 43% of the papers did not state the number of interviews made, 50% did not mention when the data were collected, and 70% did not provide details on how the analysis was conducted. If this is also the case for service research, we must conclude that much qualitative research lacks rigor. If the keys to evaluate the rigor of qualitative research lie in transparency and traceability, qualitative researchers could easily make dramatic improvements. To increase transparency, researchers could provide more extensive appendices and web appendices to provide details of their research methodologies that do not fit in the body of the manuscript. Transparency and traceability are key to improving the perception of rigor in qualitative research.

The manuscripts included in this special issue make significant contributions to our knowledge and understanding of qualitative service research and its application. This understanding exists on several levels. First, we get an overview of qualitative research in service marketing, looking at both the past and the future. Second, we get an introduction to qualitative research methods uncommon in service research. Methods like text analysis, picture elicitation, and design methodology can be used in different ways to build new knowledge. Third, we learn about how ethnography can be used in service research. With the present emphasis on both ethnography and netnography (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018), this special issue highlights the key characteristics of ethnographic research. Finally, we get a reflection on some key areas of service research, such as action research and case study research, with authors sharing their experiences of performing and publishing qualitative research. In summary, the manuscripts in this special issue show how qualitative service research that is interesting, rigorous, relevant, and rich gets published and contributes to service theory and practice.

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We want to acknowledge our fellow researchers who contributed to our special issue. We first thank all researchers who submitted their fine manuscripts for consideration. Not all of the original submissions could be published here, but we are looking forward to seeing the papers published elsewhere soon. We also extend our warmest thanks to our panel of skilled reviewers, who willingly provided their time and expertise to reviewing manuscripts. Finally, we are grateful to the Co-Editors of Journal of Services Marketing, Rebekah Russell-Bennett and Mark Rosenbaum, for supporting us and encouraging our special issue, “Advancing Qualitative Research Methodology in Service Research.”

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