

# A Theories-in-Use Approach to Building Marketing Theory

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## Abstract

This article's objective is to inspire and provide guidance on the development of marketing knowledge based on the theories-in-use (TIU) approach. The authors begin with a description of the TIU approach and compare it with other inductive and deductive research approaches. The benefits of engaging in TIU-based research are discussed, including the development of novel organic marketing theories and the opportunity to cocreate relevant marketing knowledge with practitioners. Next, they review criteria for selecting research questions that are particularly well-suited for examination with TIU-based research. This is followed by detailed suggestions for TIU research: focusing on developing new constructs, theoretical propositions (involving antecedents, moderators, and consequences), and arguments for justifying theoretical propositions. A discussion of TIU tradecraft skills, validity checks, and limitations follows. The authors close with a discussion of future theory-building opportunities using the TIU approach.

## Keywords

building theory, grounded theory, theories-in-use, theory construction, theory development

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The marketing discipline is at a crossroads (Lehmann, McAlister, and Staelin 2011; Reibstein, Day and Wind 2009). Marketing scholars can continue on the well-worn road of largely testing or extending theories by borrowing from allied disciplines, or we can challenge ourselves to make a significant difference in the lives of managers, public policy officials, and/or consumers. Our point of view is that this road less traveled necessitates deeply and richly exploring marketing topics from the perspectives of individuals (i.e., consumers, managers, and/or public policy officials) who are closest to the problem. This means leaving the comfortable confines of our faculty offices to explore, identify, and define new marketing concepts in their natural habitat.

Importantly, as we leave our offices to engage with individuals closest to the problem, we are not simply advocating recording, summarizing, and building rich descriptive narratives. While these narratives are valuable in their own right, we are advocating something more. Namely, we advocate constructing new-to-the-world marketing theories. It is widely acknowledged that theories launch the fundamental knowledge of a discipline (Rust 2006) and are the building blocks for the maturation of a discipline. Articles whose primary contribution is based on proposing theories are generally viewed favorably

(Yadav 2010). In fact, theoretical advances are critical to the development of marketing as a discipline (MacInnis 2011). Not surprisingly, editors welcome new theories that are particular to the marketing discipline (see Moorman et al. 2019b). Against this background, our objective is to discuss an approach that is ideally suited to the development of theories in marketing: the “theories-in-use” (TIU) approach.

A TIU is a person's mental model of how things work in a particular context (Argyris and Schon 1974). As part of daily

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**Table 1.** Citations of Top Ten Articles Published in the *Journal of Marketing*.

Authors	Title	Citation Counts	
		From WOS	From GS
Morgan and Hunt (1994)	The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing	7,213	26,150
<b>Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985)</b>	<b>A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research</b>	<b>5,779</b>	<b>28,886</b>
<b>Zeithaml (1988)</b>	<b>Consumer Perceptions of Price, Quality, and Value: A Means-End Model and Synthesis of Evidence</b>	<b>4,960</b>	<b>19,926</b>
Vargo and Lusch (2004)	Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing	4,885	14,721
Keller (1993)	Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity	4,099	18,070
Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996)	The Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality	3,732	13,364
Narver and Slater (1990)	The Effect of Market Orientation on Business Profitability	3,304	12,336
Cronin and Taylor (1992)	Measuring Service Quality: A Reexamination and Extension	3,215	16,350
<b>Kohli and Jaworski (1990)</b>	<b>Market Orientation: The Construct, Research Propositions, and Managerial Implications</b>	<b>3,204</b>	<b>11,616</b>
Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987)	Developing Buyer-Seller Relationships	3,150	12,949

Notes: Articles in bold employ a TIU approach. WOS = Web of Science Index; GS = Google Scholar. Citation counts gathered on October 4, 2019.

life, all individuals employ mental models (Zaltman, Heffring, and LeMasters 1982). All stakeholders in marketing—among them managers, customers, employees, and public policy makers—have mental models that can be elicited by TIU research to surface interesting, novel theories and concepts that can advance both marketing practice and scholarship. Specifically, we argue that TIU is a natural approach for creating theories that are specific to marketing-related issues—what have been referred to as organic (Kohli 2009) or home-grown (Rust 2006) theories. Organic marketing theories involve central constructs that are uniquely or primarily grounded in the marketing context rather than borrowed from other disciplines such as economics or psychology. In this regard, TIU has served as an approach for organic contributions to the marketing discipline by bringing to fore concepts such as service quality, market orientation, experiential consumption, customer solutions, and hybrid offerings.

More specifically, a TIU approach can help address three fundamental problems in our discipline. First, when we borrow from other fields, our own stakeholders' problems do not guide our research. Rather than allowing our own stakeholders' problems to guide us, we force-fit a theory or framework on which to base our research. The result is that we are not building a discipline-based body of knowledge. This borrowing approach is certainly one reason that marketing scholarship is losing touch with the practice of marketing (Lehmann, McAlister, and Staelin 2011; Reibstein, Day and Wind 2009). Second, borrowing constrains us because we restrict ourselves to what is already known, thereby hampering our search for novel and interesting phenomena. Third, when using abstract theoretical constructs from other fields, we lessen our ability to communicate with our stakeholders in a vocabulary they understand. It is much easier to advance the practice of marketing if one speaks the same language as practitioners than it is to introduce an entirely new glossary of terms.

Paradoxically, only a (relatively) small number of TIU articles have been published to date. This is surprising because TIU articles not only are published in our most respected journals but have won major awards (e.g., Shelby D. Hunt/Harold H. Maynard Award, Sheth Foundation/ *Journal of Marketing* Award), have established subfields of study within the discipline (e.g., service quality, market orientation), and have been a key catalyst for endowed chair appointments at some of the best business schools. As Table 1 notes, three of the top ten articles in *Journal of Marketing* are TIU articles. Despite this clear discipline and career impact, few researchers pursue TIU research.

Accordingly, this article aims to inspire and support development of knowledge based on TIU among marketing stakeholders. To achieve this objective, we organize this article as follows. We begin with a definition of the TIU approach. In this section, we compare and contrast TIU with other grounded theory methods and deductive research methods for knowledge development. Following this, we discuss key benefits of engaging in TIU-based research. With this foundation in mind, we turn to the practice of TIU research in the field. We divide this practice discussion into two sections: one that overviews the “basics” of TIU research and one that provides insight on the advanced tradecraft of the practice. As with any method, one must be able to judge “good and bad” practice; thus, we then turn to an assessment of rigor in TIU. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of the approach. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

## Theory Construction and TIU

Zaltman, Heffring, and LeMasters (1982) note that individuals' TIU may be envisioned as a set of “if-then” relationships among actions and outcomes. For example, an advertising manager's TIU may include the proposition that if she associates her brand with an important social cause, then millennial

consumers may be more likely to buy her brand. People's TIU may also include complex if-then relationships. For example, a marketer's TIU may include the idea that a firm's customer-centricity improves its profitability, but an increase in customer centricity beyond a certain level adversely affects firm profitability because it is too costly. That is, there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between customer centricity and firm profitability.

At its core, the theory construction process involves developing novel if-then propositions. In contrast, the theory-testing process involves empirically assessing the validity of previously developed propositions. While the two processes and their aims are distinct, they potentially can be interrelated. For instance, a theory-testing effort may reveal unexpected findings, which may lead to the construction of new theory to account for the findings. Our focus in this article is on the theory construction process for developing new theory about a phenomenon.

### *The TIU Approach to Theory Construction: Key Qualities*

Argyris and Schon (1974) coined the term TIU to refer to individuals' mental models of the world that guide their deliberate behavior. They contrasted the concept with "espoused theories" that refer to the mental models individuals claim or purport to have. While overlap may exist between individuals' TIU and their espoused theories, often these two types of theory differ. For instance, individuals may be unable to articulate parts of their TIU that are tacit. More often still, defensive reasoning mindsets develop that discourage sharing revealing insights (Argyris 2010).

The TIU approach has unique characteristics that bear highlighting. The approach involves soliciting from study participants—the theory holders—the ideas they feel are important and how they are linked to one another. The emerging set of interrelated constructs, regardless of how complete or incomplete they may be as theories, become a researcher's starting point for harvesting constructs, propositions, and arguments. Researchers, however, are not simply passive recorders of participants' thinking. They use their viewing lenses to elicit, evaluate, abstract and extend what they "hear" from theory holders included in the study (Zaltman 2003). The TIU approach relies on one-on-one participant conversations and elicits theories from a relatively small number of participants (often 15–25).

The TIU approach is also unique in that it is a partnership that allows for the cocreation of a theory. Participants are treated as active partners in the theory development process, allowing for the presence of implicit and explicit causal thinking among them about the ideas they consider important. Researchers may then draw on other sources of insight they have acquired about the topic to modify the ultimate constructs' abstraction levels and causal connections among them to develop theoretical propositions. Said differently, a TIU approach assumes that the theory holders being interviewed have theories that researchers can uncover and extend using

other sources of insight. This is what makes a TIU approach a partnership. It is grounded in two different mindsets—that of the researcher and the interviewees—*each focused on theory*.

A TIU approach becomes an even stronger partnership when researchers convene representative stakeholders including some original study participants to critique and discuss the researcher's tentative formal theory. In this way, two mindsets, the researcher's and the theory holders', are formally brought to bear on the topic. A new and better theory is likely to be created. This is less likely or even unlikely to occur with other approaches falling under the rubric of grounded theory construction.

### *TIU Versus Other Approaches to Theory Construction*

In general, the theory construction process is inductive in nature. Scholars collect various types of data through means such as unobtrusive observations, secondary data, and participant interviews. They reflect on these data to identify patterns and create new theory. The theory so developed is termed "grounded theory" to indicate that it is created from observations and data pertaining to a phenomenon on the ground (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Eisenhardt, Graebner, and Sonenshein 2016; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Suddaby 2006).

We provide an overview of three formal approaches for building grounded theory in Table 2: TIU, case studies and ethnography. The TIU approach relies on elicitation of theories held by individuals with proximity to the problem (e.g., Challengalla, Murtha, and Jaworski 2014). Case studies are in-depth studies of one or a few comparative cases (e.g., Chase and Murtha 2019; Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006). Ethnographies are in-depth studies of a phenomenon aimed at describing its meaning/significance to a group's members and the reasons underlying the meaning/significance (e.g., Gollnhofer, Weijo, and Schouten 2019).<sup>1</sup> Importantly, researchers can use these approaches in tandem; for example, a researcher using the case study method can fruitfully include a TIU approach for making comparisons across cases.

The theory construction process, however, can also be deductive in nature. For instance, in theoretical modeling, researchers set up models (settings/scenarios) with different characteristics and derive implications of the models for the behaviors of participants in the model (e.g., firms, salespeople, consumers). These behaviors are then linked to the (differing) characteristics of the different models (generally across articles) to construct new theory (Moorthy 1993).

In many instances, researchers review the literature, see gaps or conflicts, and propose new theory, often by introducing a moderator construct or a new explanation stimulated by their own experiences or derived from extant research. This process can be inductive or deductive in nature. For instance, when researchers combine knowledge about a phenomenon in the literature with their personal experiences related to the

<sup>1</sup> We thank John Sherry for his helpful comments in this section.

**Table 2.** TIU and Related Approaches.

Research	Inductive (Grounded Theory)			Deductive
	TIU	Case Study	Ethnography	Theoretical Modeling
Purpose	Build new theory	Build new theory	Understand a phenomenon's meaning/significance and its underlying reasons	Build new theory
Researcher mindset	Exploration, Hunting	Exploration, Hunting	Exploration, Hunting	Building realistic yet tractable models/scenarios
Research process	From data to theory	From data to theory	From data to a phenomenon's meaning/significance for a social group, and underlying reasons for the meaning/significance	Mathematically derive implications for actors' behavior, and compare across models
Data collection method	Interviews, focus groups	Interviews, field observations, review of documents	Field observations, interviews, review of documents and textual data, material artifacts, netnography	N.A.
Sample selection	Theoretical sampling	Theoretical sampling	Target social group(s)	N.A.
Sample size/depth	In-depth conversations (small n)	In-depth case comparisons (small n)	Immersion in the target social group(s)	N.A.
Examples	Challagalla, Murtha, and Jaworski (2014)	Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006)	Gollnhofer, Weiyo, and Schouten (2019)	Dzyabura and Hauser (2019)

Notes: N.A. = not applicable.

phenomenon to develop new theory, it is more akin to an inductive process. In contrast, when researchers put two or more findings/assertions in the literature together to derive a new theory, the process is deductive in nature.

Table 2 shows prominent inductive and deductive approaches for theory construction and summarizes key differences among them with respect to six facets: purpose, researcher mindset, research process, data collection method, sample selection, and sample size/depth. As the table shows, a major difference between the inductive and deductive approaches is that whereas inductive approaches start with data pertaining to a phenomenon of interest, deductive approaches start with models (settings/scenarios) or theories and work through their implications. A related difference is that whereas a researcher's mindset in inductive approaches is one of exploration and hunting (seeking and processing data in quest of theoretical insights) for constructs and theories inherent but hidden or as yet unarticulated in data, the researcher's mindset in deductive approaches is one of setting up models that are sufficiently realistic yet tractable.

### Why Use a TIU Approach?

As with any research approach, TIU suits certain research questions better than others. We identify major motivations for engaging in TIU research, whether as a stand-alone approach or in combination with other approaches. We find that TIU research is particularly valuable when scholars want to (1) construct organic marketing theories, especially about new and emerging phenomena; (2) extend extant perspectives and

address ambiguities; or (3) guide future empirical efforts. In this section, we take a closer look at these three motivations.

### Construct Organic Marketing Theories

Constructing organic theories is important to any discipline because organic theories offer unique insights not available outside of the discipline and thus provide good reasons for the discipline's existence as an academic field. Unfortunately, marketing scholars tend to borrow more heavily from other fields than those fields recognize and borrow from marketing (Clark et al. 2014, Pieters and Baumgartner 2003). However, the development of organic marketing theories—such as that on service quality, market orientation, and experiential consumption—has influenced other fields, and articles on these topics often receive thousands of citations. As noted by Steenkamp (2018, p. 171), “Clearly, the academic market recognizes the value of homegrown constructs and theories.”

Because the TIU approach takes advantage of marketing practitioners' or consumers' experience and knowledge about the marketing setting, it is especially well suited to identifying and defining important constructs that reflect the practical world of marketing, including antecedents and consequences of marketing phenomena. Consider two examples: service quality (see Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [1985]) and market orientation (see Kohli and Jaworski [1990]). Both sets of authors used the TIU approach to develop their pioneering conceptual frameworks. They were able to do so in part because managers had developed practices that offered useful grist for the development of ideas on each topic. Each conceptual framework has prompted significant empirical work and

**Table 3.** Examples of Organic Theoretical Contributions Using TIU Research.

Focus	Authors	Organic Constructs and/or Theory
Managers	Keaveney (1995)	Customer switching behavior Dimensions and Determinants of Marketing Organization
	Workman, Homburg, and Gruner (1998)	
	Homburg, Workman, and Jensen (2000)	Customer focused organization structure
	Narayandas and Rangan (2004)	Building and sustaining buyer– seller relationships
	Morgan, Anderson, and Mittal (2005)	Customer satisfaction information usage in firms
	Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj (2007)	Customer solutions
	Ulaga and Reinartz (2011)	Hybrid offerings
	Challagalla, Murtha, and Jaworski (2014)	Marketing doctrine
	Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, and Wilson (2016)	Customers' judgment of solution value
	Houston et al. (2018)	Prerelease consumer buzz
Chase and Murtha (2019)	Selling to Barricaded Buyers	
Consumers	Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985)	Service quality
	Zeithaml (1988)	Consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value

paved the way for substantial research streams on services and market orientation over many years, and is among the top ten cited articles in the *Journal of Marketing* (see Table 1). Table 3 provides an illustrative set of articles that develop organic theory using the TIU approach.

### *Extend Extant Perspectives and Address Ambiguities*

Theories-in-use-based research is also useful when the aim is to extend extant perspectives about a construct. For example, while research on customer solutions in business markets mushroomed in the early 2000s, solutions were viewed only from the suppliers' perspective. Missing from the discussion was a customer-centric perspective on solution offerings. Using a TIU approach, Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj (2007) provided a view of solutions from the customers' perspective, which extended the supplier view of solutions. Similarly, when conflicting theoretical perspectives exist on a novel construct, a TIU approach can help researchers better understand when and why one theoretical perspective may be preferable to the other. Relatedly, the TIU approach can bring precision and clarity when there is ambiguity surrounding constructs and/or nomological net of relationships among constructs. The approach has fewer advantages when working with well-defined constructs where the nomological net has been mapped out comprehensively in prior research.

### *Guide Empirical Efforts*

Theories-in-use research is often the ideal foundation for empirical efforts. As an example, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) used a TIU approach to understand the meaning of service quality from the perspective of consumers, employees, and executives, which guided two major empirical efforts that produced multiple publications.

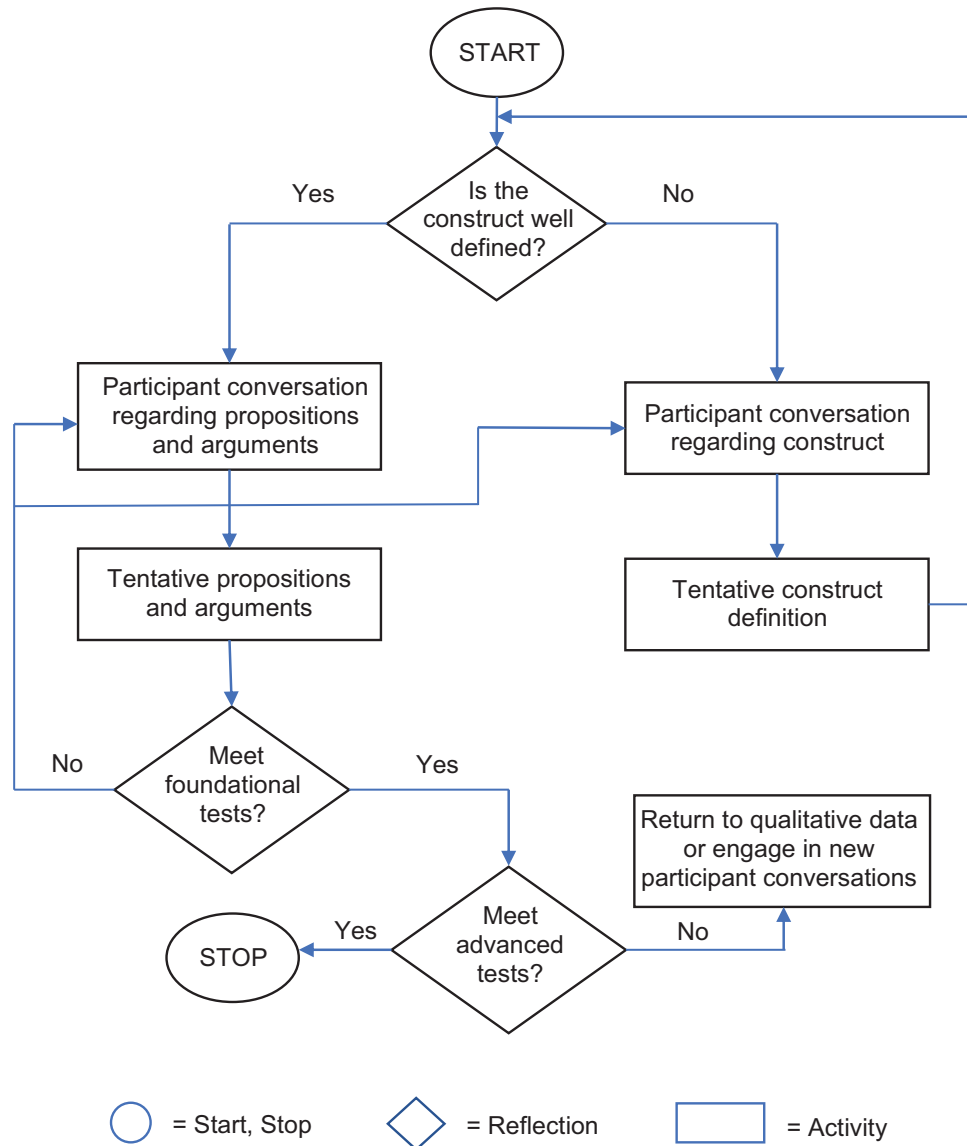
The first effort resulted in identifying ten dimensions of perceived service quality gleaned from eight group interviews. The researchers termed the first set of empirical efforts SERVQUAL, a multidimensional scale for measuring consumer perceptions and expectations of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988, 1994a, b; Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml 1991a, b). Development of scales rests on sound conceptual foundations, and insights of specifics provided by practitioners in a TIU approach helped inform these operationalizations. When queried about the need for expectations in the measure, the authors followed up with another TIU study (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1993).

The second effort resulted in the gaps model of service quality, which linked performance by various entities (e.g., employees, channels) to the gap between consumer expectations and perceptions of service quality, and the communication and control processes within organizations that produce these gaps (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988). A follow-up study empirically examined these variables to identify the most important in each of the four gaps and the relative importance of the four gaps themselves (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml 1991a). Finally, the researchers empirically linked perceived service quality to intentions to examine the behavioral consequences of perceived service quality (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996).

### **Implementing a TIU Approach**

The TIU approach is best suited for addressing research questions/issues that are broad and deep, and for which we do not have good answers. Research participants should be selected for their knowledgeability about the questions/issues and willingness to share their knowledge and experiences with the researcher. In general, a typical research project requires 15–25 participants selected in successive phases. The knowledge/experience required of the participants in each phase becomes clearer as the research progresses and theoretical ideas come into sharper focus. Importantly, the researcher should have a very strong interest in the research questions/issues and should have good general knowledge related to them. This enables the researcher to listen carefully to participants, ask probing questions, challenge participants when appropriate, and engage with participants in a flexible way—adapting the questions asked to the idiosyncratic knowledge of individual participants and to the learnings from prior participants in the TIU study.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the TIU research process. The process typically begins with a focal research construct to be examined in the research (e.g., market orientation, service



**Figure 1.** The TIU research process: an approximation.

Notes: Foundational tests = Are propositions plausible, and aligned with definitions and arguments? Advanced tests = Are propositions interesting, substantially informative, and hang together (have one or a few common themes)?

quality).<sup>2</sup> If the construct is not well defined, the research begins by clarifying and defining the core construct. This may take several iterations and feedback loops based on participant conversations (see right-hand side of Figure 1). If the construct is well defined, the research moves to the stage of developing propositions and their associated arguments. The propositions can include antecedents, consequences, mediators, and or moderators. After a few conversations, the researcher begins to formulate tentative propositions that may be assessed on basic

screening criteria related to the plausibility and strength of reasoning. After multiple propositions are developed, they must also pass higher-order assessments that relate to the overall contribution of the set of propositions (see Figure 1). These pertain to whether the collective set of ideas adds to the existing literature. As Figure 1 shows, there are numerous feedback loops illustrating the continual iteration and refinement of the conceptual structure.

The aim in TIU research is not to simply transcribe participants' statements. Rather, it is to review data across participants, look for common themes/ideas in the specifics provided by participants, and abstract commonalities to broader constructs/variables that form the building blocks of an emergent theory. A researcher strives not to present a *particular*

<sup>2</sup> If the core construct to be investigated is not yet clear, participant conversations may suggest a different construct that the researcher may ultimately decide is more fruitful to pursue than the one they started with.

**Table 4.** Construct Hunting: A Suggested Conversation Flow for TIU Research.

Introduction: Some companies (and managers) have begun to explore the concept of X. It seems you are also exploring this idea within your organization.

- Can you tell me a bit about your approach to X?
- What motivated you—or your organization—to pursue X?
- Do you have a common definition of what “X” means in your organization?
- If not, in your own words, can you help me better understand this concept or idea?
- Why is this concept important (valuable, useful, helpful) for you and your organization?
- From your perspective, how is this concept different than Y (a similar idea or concept)?

participant’s TIU but rather to present a theory reflective of the beliefs and actions of *multiple* participants, including variables and propositions extrapolated from those beliefs and actions (see Zaltman and Coulter [1995] and Zaltman [1983, 1997]).<sup>3</sup>

Researchers should develop a brief conversation guide that lists a few broad questions they wish to ask participants, along with related probes and follow-up questions.<sup>4</sup> If permitted, each conversation should be recorded, notes should be taken during the conversation, and a memo to oneself written immediately following the conversation as to how it adds to prior ideas and points to future lines of inquiry. A researcher returns to these recordings, notes, and memos as a theory begins to take shape and uses them to provide substantiating evidence in the research report.

The purpose of conversations with participants is to tap into their tacit and explicit knowledge and beliefs about the research problem/questions of interest to the researcher: (1) construct development, (2) proposition development, and/or (3) argument development. In this section, we describe the nature of the conversations needed for each of these three research problems. We first provide basic guidelines on the TIU research approach, followed by more advanced guidelines for addressing the three research problems. In the next two subsections, we discuss tradecraft related to the fieldwork and identify important checks for rigor in the research.

### Basic Guidelines

**Construct development.** We suggest starting a participant conversation by introducing the topic and segueing into asking what the phenomenon (construct) means to the participant and others familiar to the participant. For an illustrative conversation flow and set of questions, see Table 4. The researcher must

<sup>3</sup> We should note here that there is nothing wrong per se with relying on a particular participant’s TIU. However, our experience is that participants rarely hold theories that are formed well enough to be suitable for publication in academic journals.

<sup>4</sup> This guide should be provided in the published article.

**Table 5.** Key Questions/Probes for Building Theories Using the TIU Approach.

Construct Trapping: Firming Up the Construct Meaning/Boundary	
Research Goal	Sample Question for Participant
Assess construct boundary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Would you say X includes the notion of...?”</li> <li>• “I read a recent article that is a little different than your view...”</li> </ul>
Assess working definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Based on interviews to date, X may be defined as...Thoughts?”</li> <li>• “Here is another way to think about X; what do you think?”</li> </ul>
Building If-Then Propositions (Consequence Variables)	
Research Goals	Sample Questions for Participant
Assess X-Y relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Another interviewee says X causes Y. What is your view?”</li> <li>• “My last interview said X causes Y. What is your reaction?”</li> </ul>
Link X to novel outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “What are the benefits of doing X?”</li> <li>• “Any outcomes counter to conventional wisdom?”</li> <li>• “Can you tell me the pros and cons of doing X?”</li> </ul>
Building If-Then Propositions (Antecedents, Moderator, and Mediating Variables)	
Research Goals	Sample Questions for Participant
Find “positive” X antecedents	• “What are the key drivers of X?”
Find “negative” X antecedents	• “What are the key barriers of X?”
Find general antecedents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “How do you increase the level of X in your firm?”</li> <li>• “Why is X gaining (or losing) traction in your firm?”</li> </ul>
Find moderators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Under what conditions does X work best? Why?”</li> <li>• “When does X NOT lead to Y? Why?”</li> </ul>
Find mediators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Are there any other routes through which X impacts Y?”</li> <li>• “Does X influence other variables that in turn impact Y?”</li> </ul>

ask for specific examples of varying levels of the phenomenon and how it is similar to or different from other proximal constructs (for specific questions, see the top section of Table 5). The researcher should periodically check whether the tentative definitions (s)he is forming are consistent with participants’ understanding of the phenomenon. Participant conversations flow unpredictably and generate a lot of ideas and stories, many of which may not relate to the research problem of defining the construct of interest. The researcher must, therefore, continually try to refocus the conversation on the construct (and away from, for example, its antecedents or consequences or just irrelevant information).

For example, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) started participant conversations by asking, “What does the term market orientation mean to you?” Some of the responses were along the following lines: “It’s all about customer need satisfaction,”<sup>5</sup> “You have to know what competition you are up against,” “It means your research and development (R&D) is in touch with what’s going on in the market,” and so on. The researchers formed a tentative idea of the construct’s domain from these responses. For example, these responses suggested that the construct was about delivering customer satisfaction in the face of competition, and that R&D is somehow involved in the process.

A follow-up probe, “Tell me a little about your activities that reflect a market orientation,” elicited numerous responses. They included “We keep our eyes on the customer and competitors,” “We put the customer at the center of everything we do,” “We make sure people in one function know what people in other functions are doing,” “We reward people for providing exceptional service,” and so on. These comments suggest that the construct involves knowing customers and competitors, everyone in the company focusing on customers, and each function knowing what the other functions are doing. Note that the last quote is indeterminate as to whether it belongs to the construct’s domain or is an antecedent of the (yet to be precisely defined) construct. Follow-up probes might ask, “Can you tell me how one function finds out what the others are doing?” and “What exactly do you do to know how the consumer environment is changing?” to clarify these questions.

After a few of these conversations, the researcher begins to identify commonalities across the participant observations and to abstract them to a higher level. For example, while some participants indicated that they sent out customer surveys, others relied on syndicated data. Yet others visited customers personally. However, the commonality here is that of the generation of customer intelligence through different methods. This led to the development of the idea that market orientation involves, in part, intelligence generation about customers. Subsequent conversations and ongoing reflections led to the eventual definition of market orientation as organization-wide generation, dissemination, and responsiveness to market intelligence.

**Proposition development.** A researcher’s focus here is the development of if-then propositions that aim to identify a phenomenon’s antecedents, consequences, mediators, and/or moderators of the phenomenon’s effects. At one level, this is relatively straightforward—the researcher asks participants questions such as “Can you give me examples of actions you took to increase X (the phenomenon)?,” “In your opinion, what happens when X increases?,” “Can you recall instances in which X didn’t lead to that?,” and “What accounts for the

unexpected results?” However, participants frequently identify antecedents that reflect the core construct itself or are too proximal to the core construct to be of theoretical interest. For example, when asked to indicate why some organizations are not very market oriented, one participant said, “It’s because they fail to give customers what they want.” Note that this is a part of the market orientation construct, not its antecedent.

The types of questions that the researcher asks should be based on the research goal (see Table 5). For example, if the research goal is to link construct X to novel outcomes, the researcher may ask, “What are the benefits of doing X?,” “Were there any surprises or unexpected outcomes of doing X?,” or “Did increasing the level of X lead to outcomes that contradict conventional wisdom about X?”

As the conversations progress, the researcher forms a relatively clear (albeit tentative) proposition that X leads to Y. At this point, the researcher can assess the proposition by asking questions directly related to the proposition. For example, the researcher may say, “My last interviewee believes that X leads to Y. What is your view?” or “My last interviewee found that X leads to Y. What is your reaction?” This is particularly useful for propositions that include abstract constructs developed by the researcher. If the level of abstraction is too high, subsequent participants are likely to indicate that the proposition(s) is questionable.

**Argument development.** In addition to developing if-then and “if-then-except-when” theoretical propositions, a researcher must also provide plausible arguments or justifications for the propositions. Argument development involves probing participants for the reasons they hold their if-then beliefs. Thus, a researcher may ask participants, “Why do you believe X leads to Y?” or “Why do you expect M to strengthen the effect of X on Y?” Developing an argument may also involve listening to the reasons offered by participants and identifying one or more mediators of the effect of X on Y. As in the case of developing theoretical propositions, the challenges here pertain to appropriate level of abstraction as well as to maintaining consistency with the evolving definitions of the core construct and the antecedent, consequence, or moderator variables involved.

### **Advanced Guidelines<sup>6</sup>**

**Construct development.** A key aspect of theory construction using a TIU approach is the process of abstraction from the raw data surfaced in the course of participant conversations. Abstraction involves considering two or more elements (e.g., words, phrases, ideas in one or more sentences) in raw data (e.g., transcriptions of participant conversations), pooling the elements into a higher-order category or construct, and giving it a label (i.e., name/term). Such a construct is of a higher order (i.e., is more abstract) than the elements in the sense that it

<sup>5</sup> The quotes in the current research are approximate, and some examples are stylized.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of two specialized techniques for theory construction (the Kelly Repertory Grid and the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique), see the Web Appendix.



captures the essential information in the two or more elements but excludes some of their details. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to the general process of identifying and categorizing distinct elements in the data as “open coding.”

A researcher may use one or more of several approaches for abstracting from the elements (e.g., words, phrases) contained in the data obtained from participant conversations. We discuss three approaches. In the first approach, a researcher examines the data within and across participant conversations and notices that they contain several elements that have different meanings but all seem to be subsets of one of the elements in the data. In this case, the latter element is of a high-order (i.e., is more abstract), and the researcher may consider it a candidate construct for his or her theory. The abstraction process here is one of identifying elements that are all a part of a broader, more abstract element and treating all as the latter element for the purpose of theory construction. Importantly, this calls for the researcher to actively seek out such interrelationships among the elements to identify them. For example, participants may provide the following statements to a researcher to indicate that their respective firms are market oriented: “We *survey* customers to find out their needs and wants,” “Our company does a lot of *market research* every quarter,” “Our salespeople *ask customers* how we can serve them better,” and “We *generate intelligence* about our markets.” In this case, the process of abstraction involves observing that the italicized elements in the first three statements are subsets of the italicized element in the fourth statement and thus suggests using the construct of “market intelligence generation” in subsequent theory construction efforts.

In the second approach, a researcher examines the data within and across participants and notices that they contain elements that likely co-occur (or covary). That is, when one element is present (or is at a high level), another element is also likely to be present (or at a high level). The researcher pools these elements into a higher-order category or construct and, if needed, gives it a label/name. For example, one or more participants may describe customer reactions to exceptional service in restaurants as follows: “They *feel valued* as customers,” “Their *eyes come alive*,” “They *smile, and thank* the waitpersons,” and “They *leave big tips*.” Each of the italicized elements likely occurs when the other elements also occur. As such, the researcher may pool them into a higher-order category or construct of customer satisfaction and use it for subsequent theory construction.

In the third approach, the researcher examines the data within and across participants and notices that they contain elements (e.g., words, phrases) that are neither subsets of one of the elements (approach 1) nor do they necessarily co-occur or covary (approach 2). Rather, they appear to be different facets/dimensions/aspects of a broader concept or idea. The researcher pools these elements into the higher-order category or construct and, if needed, gives it a label/name. For example, participants may describe outcomes of investing in market research as “Market research helps us get a bigger *piece of the market*,” “It brings in more *revenue*,” and “It costs money,

but in the end, we *save money* because we don’t try to be all things to all customers.” The italicized elements are not subsets of one of them and often do not covary, but each is an indicator of the broader concept of how well a firm is performing. As such, the researcher may pool them into a higher-order category or construct of firm performance for use in subsequent theory construction.

Importantly, as a construct’s meaning begins to form, a researcher must take care that the construct’s domain is not too narrow or too broad. If it is too narrow, it is too specific and limits the generalizability of the theory. If it is too broad, its components may not all relate to other constructs (potential antecedents or consequences) in a similar manner. This becomes clearer as the construct’s antecedents and consequences emerge in the course of participant conversations. Importantly, as a construct’s meaning begins to emerge, the researcher must ascertain whether it is truly capturing a distinct phenomenon, one not reflected by other known constructs (especially those already discussed in the literature). For example, when asked whether they thought market orientation and customer orientation were the same thing or different, most participants pointed out that market orientation was a broader construct in that it focused on customers and other influences on them, whereas customer orientation focused exclusively on customers. Upon reflection, it became clear that the two would have somewhat different antecedents (e.g., company systems that base rewards on customer satisfaction vs. those that base them on broader metrics such as market share and profitability).

**Proposition development.** After developing constructs, a researcher links them to develop tentative theoretical propositions, stimulated by participants’ TIU elicited in course of participant conversations. The general process of linking two or more concepts with each other is referred to as “axial coding” (Corbin and Strauss 2008). There are two main challenges in developing propositions that identify antecedent, consequence, mediator, and moderator variables.

First, when the core construct/phenomenon is yet to be defined precisely, the emerging antecedents, consequences, mediators and moderators need to be identified and defined in conjunction with the core construct in a way that the resulting propositions make sense. For example, when a participant in the market orientation research was asked, “Why do some firms fail to give customers what they want?,” he indicated, “Well, they are afraid of changing what they have done for many years. They feel safe doing the tried and tested.” A further “why” probe led to “Because they are afraid they will be pulled up by the management if they do something different and it bombs.” A few more probes later led to the more interesting revelation that an organization’s employees may fail to provide customers the offerings they need because of the fear of being punished by their managers who themselves are concerned about being punished by a risk-averse top management. This led to the identification of “top management risk aversion” as an antecedent of market orientation. Note that “top

management risk aversion” is not a part of the core construct and is a relatively abstract, novel construct, and the proposition makes sense if market orientation is defined in part as responding to customers’ changing needs.

Second, the propositions developed should ideally be novel (i.e., not documented in the literature) and interesting (i.e., not obvious but useful). Such propositions often challenge conventional wisdom, identify conditions in which extant theory does not hold, or develop interesting nuances that lead to “aha!” moments for the readers. Frequently, however, participants offer input with little insight. For example, when asked why some firms are more market oriented than others, several participants indicated, “Firms that are market oriented are that way because they care,” and “It takes hard work to be market oriented.” These and many other ideas that emerged in the course of the conversations were either obvious or previously documented and, therefore, not pursued further. It is important for the researcher to continually ensure that the propositions (s)he is generating and retaining for further consideration are new to the literature, interesting, plausible, and of importance to some set of stakeholders.<sup>7</sup>

**Argument development.** A straightforward way for a researcher to develop arguments to support a theoretical proposition is to ask participants why they believe (and perhaps why they do not believe) in a proposition. It is very important, however, for a researcher to critically evaluate the soundness of the reasoning before accepting it as plausible. The researcher may also develop theoretical propositions and arguments by connecting disparate ideas obtained from two or more participants. For example, one participant may note that doing A leads to Y, and another participant may suggest that doing X leads to A; putting these two assertions together would suggest the testable proposition that doing X leads to Y, the argument being that X leads to A, which in turn leads to Y.

**Pulling it all together.** Frequently, a researcher’s goal is to construct a set of coherent theoretical propositions that collectively represent a substantial contribution to the literature. After generating a reasonably large number of theoretical propositions, a researcher should take stock of them with a view to selecting the ones that have one or a few common themes such that the selected set can be formalized in a parsimonious way. The researcher may group the constructs involved across propositions into broader categories, or identify one or a few common high-level arguments across propositions. The general process of choosing from among the theoretical ideas developed in a research process is referred to as selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it may be useful to briefly note antecedents, consequences, or moderators that may be obvious/intuitive but important such that a reader has a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

## TIU Tradecraft

In this section, we discuss key nuances of the TIU research process and offer suggestions that increase the likelihood of developing impactful new theory. Following this, we offer suggestions for crafting research papers.

### Extensive Iteration

As noted previously, the theory construction process entails collecting data from a few participant conversations and then interacting with the data to generate preliminary, tentative theory (constructs, propositions, and arguments). The tentative theory guides the researcher’s focus in collecting data from subsequent participants. These data frequently augment the tentative theory and/or suggest its modification (e.g., revising constructs, changing their abstraction levels, adding propositions, developing new arguments). The resulting theory, in turn, guides subsequent data collection, and so on, until a researcher is satisfied with the theory.

For example, say that a researcher is interested in constructing a theory of postrecession performance of firms. Drawing on data collected from the first few participants, the researcher constructs a tentative theory that a firm that increases its R&D spending during a recession enjoys higher market share after the recession. After a few more conversations, the researcher constructs another tentative theory that a firm that invests in operations to make them more efficient during a recession increases its profitability after the recession because it redirects slack resources during the recession to reducing ongoing operations costs. At this point, the researcher considers the elements “R&D spending” and “investments in operations” and abstracts them to a broader construct of capability building. Similarly, the researcher abstracts “market share” and “profitability” to a broader construct of firm performance. Using these constructs, the researcher constructs the proposition “The greater a firm’s capability building during a recession, the greater the firm performance postrecession.”

### Active Listening

A researcher is not simply a passive ear. The maxim that data do not say anything—only managers or researchers do—applies to TIU research as much as it does to other methods (Zaltman 2016). Theories-in-use approaches provide a special opportunity for researchers to exercise disciplined imagination and add unique value to an investigation. This occurs, for instance, when researchers listen carefully for what a participant is *not* saying (i.e., what potentially important ideas seem to be missing or understated by interviewees). For example, in an insight development project, managers had little to say about the important constraints placed on insight development by long-standing company policies.

Similarly, a researcher may develop a theoretical proposition that was not directly stated or derivable from participant data but still grounded in them. For instance, one participant

may identify P as a new antecedent of a phenomenon, and another participant may identify M as a moderator of the effect of a different antecedent R. The two sets of ideas may lead the researcher to examine whether M may moderate the influence of P (in addition to that of R). A researcher also has an important role in adding value by explaining why certain findings are surprising, counterintuitive, or contrary to received wisdom on the topic.

### ***Belief Suspension***

When engaging with a participant, it is key for researchers to temporarily suspend their prior beliefs and tentative ideas developed in the course of previous participant conversations. This is not easy, but it is important to listen with an open mind, absorb the participant's ideas, and probe deeper into those that have the potential for generating new insights. Researchers can feign ignorance and ask a number of "why" questions even if they believe they know the answer: "Why do you say that?," "Why does it affect X?," "Why would doing X not be helpful in circumstance M?" As these questions continue, they can lead to interesting new insights.

### ***Depth over Breadth***

As may be evident from the previous examples, participant conversations elicit considerable commentary. When listening to a participant's responses, the researcher should try to identify and define the abstract construct that reflects the detailed description provided by the participant. To the extent the researcher is successful in doing this, the theory construction task following the participant conversations becomes easier because a theory essentially is a set of interrelated constructs. It is helpful to record participant conversations as well as take notes during the conversations, which can be revisited in the course of developing construct definitions, theoretical propositions, and arguments.

### ***Openness to New Issues***

It is sometimes more productive for a researcher to go where a participant's interest takes the conversation rather than strictly focus on the precise questions with which the researcher comes into the conversation. For instance, a participant may say something that may seem a bit odd or unrelated to the research questions. The researcher may be tempted to brush it aside to have a more "productive" conversation, but doing so may lead to missing out on potentially interesting and useful new ideas.

### ***Conflict Appreciation***

With each conversation a researcher learns a little more about the three components of the theory under development: construct definitions, theoretical propositions, and arguments. (S)he must relate these to those learned from earlier conversations up to that point. This provides greater confidence in similar ideas obtained in previous conversations. Ideas not

previously elicited can be noted for further exploration in subsequent conversations. The researcher may also encounter ideas that are in conflict with established ideas. For example, some participants may indicate that R&D spending in recessions hurts performance, whereas others may believe that it helps performance. These may prove to be most interesting and need to be resolved (perhaps by identifying appropriate moderators) in subsequent participant conversations.

### ***Mosaic Filling***

A researcher also tracks the components of a theory that are developing well as well as those that are "light" and need further exploration; (s)he then selects subsequent participants accordingly and engages in conversations that address those components. For example, after a few conversations with brand managers, a researcher interested in constructing a theory of brand love may learn more about the antecedents and consequences of brand love than about the moderators of its consequences. Thus, the researcher may focus more on surfacing moderators in subsequent participant conversations. At some point, researchers will recognize that continued collection and analysis of data is unlikely to yield new themes, categories, or substantive insights, a situation known as theoretical saturation.

### ***Bias Recognition***

As we know from research on cognitive biases, peoples' mental models can be deficient. For example, opinions and strongly held feelings have a way of surviving challenges from facts. Just because a participant expresses a particular story with conviction does not mean that it should be accepted by the researcher as factual. While it is a sincere expression of the participant's judgments, the story merits critical examination and possible correction or improvement (Kahneman 2011; Sloman and Fernback 2017; Thaler 2015).

### ***Demarcation of TIU Study Limits***

It can be difficult to figure out the right "demarcation" between the "context" of a TIU study and the constructs studied. For example, a context may be business-to-business firms and a researcher may be exploring constructs X, Y, and Z. The business-to-business context, however, also has other constructs associated with it (e.g., direct sales force vs. channel partners, client concentration). Therefore, the researcher has a choice here: to study the context variables and include them in the theory, or to limit the theory to the study's context.

### ***Crafting Research Papers***

A researcher may substantiate claims about a construct's meaning and/or a theoretical proposition (along with its underlying logic) by indicating how several participant conversations reflected this. Providing direct quotes from one or two of them is a convincing way to accomplish this. These quotes provide a verbal lexicon and allow the reader the opportunity to develop

an alternative formulation. However, as participants in a conversational mode frequently allude to multiple ideas in a single sentence or two, the researcher must portray quotes that clearly and unambiguously make the intended point.

Another emergent, value-added quality that can strengthen a paper is an answer to the question, “So what?” This question can be answered from both a researcher and marketing stakeholder standpoint. For example, the final construct network or mental model that represents consensus thinking among participants can be used as a playground for theory construction. The researcher may offer an additional map containing new constructs and their proposed relationships along with those already in the map. The changes in the map (i.e., the new constructs and their connections with others previously identified in the interviews) would represent the researcher’s unique reflections about the data. This new bundle of related, testable propositions is a new theory that could guide future research and thinking.

The consensus map may also be a basis for helping marketing stakeholders think through its relevance to their positions. The researcher can offer “map management” suggestions to stakeholders. For instance, they might be encouraged to ask, “Which constructs should be emphasized or deemphasized in their situation? How might particular connections between constructs be weakened or strengthened? What new constructs may be added to the original consensus map network?” Essentially, questions like these help stakeholders shore up strengths in their thinking and compensate for limitations.

## Evaluating Rigor in TIU Research

This section offers criteria for evaluating the rigor of a TIU-based study. Some of the criteria commonly used to evaluate studies include internal validity, external validity, and reliability (see Nunnally [1978]). Several scholars, however, have long argued that these criteria are cast in a positivist tradition, and that different criteria should be used to evaluate interpretive research (e.g., Guba 1981; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Researchers have developed numerous criteria for evaluating interpretive research, some of which mirror the commonly used criteria of reliability and validity. Prominent among these are four criteria described by Guba (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (see also Baxter and Eyles [1997]; Denzin and Lincoln [2000]). These criteria are discussed by Hirschman (1986) and have been used in prior marketing research (e.g., Flint, Wooldruff and Gardial 2002).

A TIU-based study shares aspects of the positivist as well as the interpretive traditions. It is positivist in that it aims to develop clear new causal associations about a phenomenon and interpretive in that it uses study participants’ interpretations of the phenomenon. For this reason, we adapt the four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) for evaluating the rigor of TIU-based research and indicate tests researchers can use to demonstrate (and evaluate) the rigor of their new theories. Importantly, while these four criteria are useful, we suggest they need to be complemented by a fifth

criterion—distinctiveness—that refers to the novelty of a theory’s constructs and propositions (relative to extant literature). This criterion is central for evaluating TIU research whose aim is the construction of new theory. Table 6 summarizes these five criteria and how they may be used for evaluating TIU research.

### *Credibility*

Credibility is analogous to internal validity, and in the context of TIU-based research refers to the extent to which a new theory’s if-then propositions are plausible.<sup>8</sup> This may be demonstrated by providing strong arguments to support the propositions. For this reason, we recommend probing participants for why they believe in their if-then propositions. Their responses (potentially combined with extant theories and findings in the literature) can be instrumental in constructing persuasive arguments for the new theory’s if-then propositions. We also recommend asking participants range-spanning questions to encourage them to consider the full range of constructs involved (e.g., very high to very low; e.g., Kohli and Jaworski 1990). For example, if some participants indicate that strong loyalty programs lead to higher market shares, it is useful to ask subsequent participants (or the same participants later in course of the conversations) about the consequences of having weak loyalty programs along with the reasons for those consequences. If participants indicate that one of the consequences is low market share and they provide the same argument for it, documenting this information is likely to increase the theory’s credibility. Finally, we recommend comparing across participants. To the extent multiple participants suggest the same theory, its credibility is enhanced.

### *Transferability*

Transferability is analogous to external validity, and in the context of TIU-based research, it refers to the extent to which a new theory’s constructs and if-then propositions are valid in contexts not included in the data used to develop the theory. Researchers can increase confidence in the transferability of their new theory through appropriate theoretical sampling of participants in their studies. As a tentative theory emerges in the course of conversations with participants, researchers can select as the next set of participants those for whom the theory may not hold (e.g., participants in different types of firms, industries, geographic locations; participants with different experiences; e.g., Challagalla, Murtha, and Jaworski 2014). To the extent the next wave of participants suggests the same emergent theory, it increases confidence in the transferability of the theory. If the subsequent participants suggest different

<sup>8</sup> This differs from the meaning of credibility in classical interpretive research, where it refers to the consistency between the account provided by a researcher and the data. This difference arises because in TIU research the focus is on if-then propositions and their credibility (more than that of a researcher’s account of participants’ input).

**Table 6.** Rigor in TIU Research.

Type of TIU Rigor	Analog to Theory-Testing Research	Meaning of Rigor Type in TIU Research	Demonstrating Rigor
Credibility	Internal validity	The extent to which a new theory's if-then propositions are plausible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide arguments to support the new if-then propositions</li> <li>• Document the inclusion of range-spanning questions in participant conversations</li> <li>• Document data from multiple participants which suggest the same theory</li> </ul>
Transferability	External validity	The extent to which a new theory's constructs and if-then propositions are valid in contexts not sampled for the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document similarities in theory emerging from participants sampled from multiple contexts</li> </ul>
Dependability	Reliability	The extent to which multiple researchers find the same constructs and if-then propositions from the same data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document similarity of constructs and if-then propositions surfaced by multiple researchers processing the same data</li> </ul>
Confirmability	Objectivity	The extent to which a new theory's constructs and if-then propositions can be independently certified as emerging from the data (rather than from researcher dispositions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document consistency of theory with participant views through participant checks</li> <li>• Document interjudge reliability: agreement between independent (external) judges about the fit between data and constructs and propositions</li> <li>• Provide thick descriptions of data to allow readers to directly assess consistency of if-then propositions with data</li> </ul>
Distinctiveness	Discriminant validity	The extent to which a new theory's constructs and if-then propositions are different from existing constructs and if-then propositions in the literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe differences in definitions of new constructs relative to those of most similar constructs in literature</li> <li>• Describe differences in the new if-then propositions relative to most similar/close propositions in the literature</li> </ul>

theories, it would indicate the need for a resolution, generally through the incorporation of one or more moderators and/or inclusion of additional antecedents/consequences.

### *Dependability*

Dependability is analogous to reliability, and in the context of TIU-based research refers to the extent to which multiple researchers (“multiple human instruments” per Hirschman [1986, p. 241]) involved in a TIU study find the same constructs and if-then propositions from the same data.<sup>9</sup> This may be assessed through comparison across researchers. To the extent multiple researchers processing the same data converge on the same theory, its dependability is enhanced.

### *Confirmability*

Confirmability is analogous to objectivity, and in the context of TIU-based research refers to the extent to which a new theory's

constructs and if-then propositions can be independently certified as emerging from the data (rather than from researchers' predispositions, interests, and motivations). Researchers can demonstrate confirmability by documenting participant checks that are similar to member checks suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Researchers may present their emerging (as well as eventual/final) theory to TIU research participants and ask them whether it is consistent with their views (as well as invite comments/remarks).

Researchers can also demonstrate confirmability by documenting agreement between two or more independent judges (i.e., knowledgeable individuals who are not involved with the research) about the new theory's correspondence with the data used to develop it. For example, researchers using a TIU approach typically develop abstract constructs from specific data (instances, examples) provided by participants. In such cases, researchers can demonstrate confirmability through interjudge reliability. This involves researchers providing two or more judges the raw/verbatim data (or a random sampling thereof) and the names of their abstract constructs and having them code the raw/verbatim data into the constructs. Following this, interjudge agreement may be computed (e.g., using proportional reduction in loss proposed by Rust and Cooil [1994]). Similarly, researchers can demonstrate confirmability by documenting agreement between two or more independent judges

<sup>9</sup> This differs from the meaning of dependability in classical interpretive research, where it refers to the stability or consistency of participant reports about a phenomenon across time. This difference arises because, in TIU research, the focus is on if-then propositions and their dependability (rather than that of each participant's report).

asked to indicate the extent to which a theory's if-then propositions correspond to the data from which they were created. Researchers can also demonstrate confirmability by providing thick descriptions of their data (e.g., verbatim participant quotes) in their reports to enable readers of the theory to do a direct assessment of the extent to which theoretical constructs, propositions, and arguments advanced in the theories are consistent with the raw data used to construct them.

As noted previously, data from TIU research participants can stimulate a researcher to develop if-then propositions that were not cited or directly suggested by any of the participants. Deviations from the data provided by participants also arise when a researcher develops a theory incorporating constructs at different levels of abstraction than those stated by participants. In such cases, we caution against strict adherence to the confirmability criterion and instead suggest using theory credibility as the more important criterion. This is because the central purpose of using TIU for theory construction is to develop new theory that accurately explains a phenomenon of interest, not one that is an accurate restatement of data provided by participants.

### *Distinctiveness*

Distinctiveness is analogous to discriminant validity, and in the context of TIU-based research, it refers to the extent to which a new theory's constructs and if-then propositions are different from existing constructs and if-then propositions in the literature. Because it is counterproductive to introduce new labels for existing constructs, it is important to ensure that new constructs in a theory refer to different phenomena than existing constructs. Construct distinctiveness may be demonstrated by definitional comparisons—comparing the proposed definition of a new construct with definitions of existing constructs that are closest to the meaning of the new construct. Proposition distinctiveness refers to the extent to which if-then propositions differ from theoretical propositions already available in the literature. Propositional distinctiveness may be demonstrated by documenting closely related existing propositions individually or in summary form and visually showing the differences between them and the new theory (e.g., in a table).

### *Summary Observations*

We argue that while all five criteria are useful for evaluating a new theory, the primary emphasis should be on credibility, transferability, and distinctiveness. Dependability and confirmability are good virtues, but not as pertinent as credibility, transferability, and distinctiveness. This is because the end goal of TIU research is the development of a new theory that can explain a phenomenon across multiple contexts; it is conceivable that researchers may develop such a theory even when it is somewhat lower on interresearcher reliability (dependability) and interjudge reliability (confirmability).

Importantly, the quality of a theory based on TIU of participants is likely to be influenced substantially by the quality of

theories held by the participants. As noted previously, researchers should take care to sample participants who are likely to be knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied and also willing to share their knowledge with the researchers. By documenting the participants' qualifications, researchers can engender greater confidence in the theories they develop using the TIU approach (see Table 7).

## **TIU Limitations and Challenges**

Like all research approaches, TIU has limitations and challenges. First, TIU, as a technique used largely for theory construction, is not suited for theory testing. However, as we have shown, TIU can be a terrific setup for guiding downstream theory-testing efforts. Second, researchers often lack (but can still acquire) the requisite skill and experience needed for doing successful interviews with key informants. Using the recommendations in this article is a good start. Next, reading the TIU research delineated in our Tables 2 and 3 will help. Finally, practicing interviews with other researchers using TIU can prepare a researcher to conduct interviews with actual participants.

Third, TIU works only when informants have sufficient knowledge and experience. For relatively new phenomena (e.g., a firm operating as a platform as well as a supplier on the platform), participants are unlikely to have well-developed theories about their long-term effects and/or the conditions under which the effects are likely to be strong or weak. Participants in these situations may still espouse theories, but they are less likely to be the product of thoughtful processing of meaningful experience. An idea about a relatively unfamiliar issue could be an uncertain participant's guess as opposed to a highly relevant but newly discovered "aha."

## **Future Research**

As we have noted, the discipline of marketing is at the crossroads. Others have suggested that if we continue on our current trajectory, we will simply accelerate our path to irrelevance (Reibstein, Day, and Wind 2009). One promising method to increase relevance to all stakeholders in the marketing system is a TIU approach. Relevant stakeholders may be managers aiming to improve practice, consumers aiming to enhance their consumption experiences, and/or policy makers aiming to improve society. In this section, we turn our attention to three specific areas of future research. The first two future research areas focus on direct applications of TIU. The first application area is non-domain-specific. Here, the emphasis is on identifying "meta issues" that can richly inform any subfield of marketing (e.g., when stakeholders disagree, when core assumptions underlying a body of work are questionable), whereas the second is focused on domain-specific (e.g., role of marketing in the firm, organic growth, digital transformation). The third category involves research on TIU as a method.

**Table 7.** Glossary of Terms Used.

Term	Description
Abstraction	The process by which a researcher identifies a more general idea from granular/particular data.
Axial coding	The process of relating categories (constructs) to other categories, thus delineating antecedents, consequences, and moderators. This information can be assembled in the form of a coding scheme or a visual picture of the process with arrows indicating the direction of the process (see Strauss and Corbin [1997]).
Confirmability	The extent to which a new theory's constructs and if-then propositions can be independently certified as emerging from the data, rather than from researchers' predispositions, interests, and motivations.
Credibility	The extent to which the "if-then" propositions that constitute a theory are plausible (i.e., are supported by persuasive arguments).
Deductive research	The deductive research approach starts with a set of accepted concepts and propositions and deduces that if these propositions are true, and if certain other conditions are met, certain specific and observable events will also occur (Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring 1982).
Dependability	The extent to which multiple researchers ("multiple human instruments," per Hirschman [1986]) involved in a TIU study are likely to find the same constructs and if-then propositions from the same data.
Esposued theories	Mental maps or theories that individuals claim to follow (Argyris and Schon 1974). These may be different from their TIU.
Grounded theory	Theory discovered through an iterative process by which a researcher becomes more and more "grounded" in the data, and develops increasingly rich concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).
Hunting	Energetically seeking and processing data in quest of theoretical insights.
Inductive research	Inductive research is concerned with the generation of new theory for which little or no previous formal theory exists. The research questions are more open-ended where theory is nascent or immature. "The inductive mode stresses the formal or informal accumulation of data, which may lead to tentative theory" (Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring 1982, p. 98).
Laddering	An in-depth interviewing technique used to develop a deeper understanding of how consumers translate the attributes of products into meaningful associations with respect to self. Laddering is based on the means-end theory (Gutman 1982) and "involves a tailored interviewing format using primarily a series of directed probes, typified by the 'Why is that important to you?' question, with the express goal of determining sets of linkages between the key perceptual elements across the range of attributes (A), consequences (C), and values (V)" (Reynolds and Gutman 1988, p. 12).
Means-end chain	A qualitative approach that uses methods such as laddering to understand how consumers link specific attributes of a product with the desired consequences and how these consequences link to their values (for examples, see Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, and Wilson [2016]; Zeithaml [1988]).
Open coding	The process of identifying and categorizing elements (concepts) in words, phrases, sentences, and more aggregate forms of data (see Strauss and Corbin [1997]).
Selective coding	The process of unifying the different categories identified in open and axial coding around a core category. The core category may emerge from amongst the categories already identified and/or may be the result from an abstraction of those categories (see Corbin and Strauss 1990).
Theoretical sampling	"Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 45).
Theoretical saturation	The stage in qualitative research where a researcher concludes that continued collection and analysis of data is unlikely to yield new themes, categories, or substantive insights.
Theory building	Theory building is "the development and use of interrelated ideas for purposes of explaining, predicting, and /or controlling event" (Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring 1982, p. 177).
Transferability	The extent to which a new theory's constructs and if-then propositions are valid in contexts that are not a part of the current study's data collection efforts.

### **Future Research: Meta Domains**

In this section, we consider research topics that could apply to any field or subfield of marketing. In a sense, these topics are "meta" questions that can guide researchers in selecting topics specific in *their* area of specialization. Next, we explore three such issues.

*An underlying assumption that may be reexamined.* An assumption is a hypothesis that is taken for granted. A theory built on an assumption that is not fully explored may be incomplete or may even contain errors. The published literature often identifies

and debates such assumptions. For example, the literature on market orientation currently has two dominant perspectives—one focusing on processing marketplace information (Kohli and Jaworski 1990) and the other focused on a market-oriented culture (Narver and Slater 1990). However, both perspectives assume that understanding customer needs and putting customers at the "center of your business" is essential for success. An interesting question to be explored using a TIU approach would be "When do customer needs *not* matter?" or "Under what conditions should the customer *not* be at the center of the business?" The notion of building businesses around customer is at the heart of our discipline, yet it could be

challenged by examining successful businesses that have taken a different approach. From a public policy perspective, there is an assumption that it is “always” best build a business around a customer; however, this assumption can also be reexamined. When do customer-oriented businesses increase consumer costs and lessen customer satisfaction?

*Conflicting firm and customer viewpoints.* A TIU approach can be very productive when a firm’s or even industry’s “theory” of its behavior in the marketplace is at odds with their customers’ “theory” of the firm’s or industry’s intentions and actions. Comparing manager theories or maps of their actions with those customers hold about the same actions can help a firm or industry achieve a better alignment with its customer base. A contemporary example involves current viewpoints regarding the pricing of drugs in the pharmaceutical industry. Here there are conflicting views held by firms (e.g., high prices support the portfolio of R&D efforts, some of which work and others do not), policy makers (e.g., consumer affordability), and customers (e.g., price gouging).

*Conflict among key stakeholders.* A TIU approach may make clear where key stakeholders agree or disagree and what options exist that can foster agreement among them. These are common situations in the public health, political, and nonprofit marketing settings. Very few articles using a TIU approach exist in the public policy domain, yet many agencies’ stakeholder interests are in conflict in that domain. For that reason, this is an especially promising domain for organic theory construction.

### *Future Research: Content Domains*

As we discussed previously, many sources exist to identify content domains suited to TIU-based research. These include Marketing Science Institute, industry-specific surveys of “hot topics,” trade association agendas, public policy agencies’ grant funding priorities, and the American Marketing Association. Many of these institutions also provide researchers with direct access to subject matter experts and offer platforms for sharing research findings. While the list of future research content domains is lengthy, we focus on a few topics that can be richly explored using the TIU approach.

*Role of marketing in the firm.* We find it curious that a dominant view exists in marketing that “best-practice marketing” entails segmenting markets, selecting target segments, developing differentiating value propositions, and then activating with a marketing mix. Any or all of these basic steps could be challenged using a TIU approach. For example, under what conditions does segmentation still matter, and when is segmentation inappropriate? When do differentiated value propositions decrease, rather than increase, sales? And, thinking more broadly about the function, when should marketing “not have a seat” at the table in business unit strategy discussions?

*Organic growth.* The litmus test for any high performing chief executive officer, general manager, or brand manager is year over year profitable organic growth. The problem in our discipline is that we often approach growth as a marketing issue. However, from a firm perspective, the issue is how to integrate all back office and commercial functions to drive organic growth. Marketing is only one piece of this puzzle. When should marketing play a prominent (or less prominent) role in shaping the growth strategy? When is it appropriate to have “chief growth officers” lead these growth efforts? What role should marketing assume when a firm decides to hire chief growth officers—and not chief marketing officers?

*Digital transformation of the firm.* This topic is front and center for most *Fortune* 500 firms, yet little theory exists to guide firm actions in structuring market communications, collecting consumer intelligence (e.g., traditional research methods plus digital footprints), or building customer-facing digital platforms (e.g., General Electric’s recent unsuccessful attempt to build a client-facing platform for the industrial internet). Research in this domain could also closely examine the implications of digital transformation for the marketing organization within a firm. For example, whereas social media is largely viewed as an avenue for advertising and promotions, several firms are actively using social media channels for customer service, direct sales, and market research (see, e.g., efforts of KLM, the Snickers “Hungerithm” campaign).

Digital transformation of industries and markets requires executives to rethink next-generation marketing resources, capabilities, and skills their companies need to secure and grow to engage with customers in new and meaningful ways in the digital age. For example, companies today increasingly focus on rolling out new subscription-based business models. In line with this fundamental trend, a growing number of firms invest in new organizational functions, such as customer success management; they hire new staff across all hierarchical levels, from vice presidents of customer success to customer success associates. Clearly, key decision makers add new customer-facing roles and responsibilities to complement others in existing areas, such as customer experience management or key account management. What are executives’ mental models underlying such decisions? Which TIUs guide managers in growing these novel marketing competencies? Research in TIU is well positioned to shed new light on this growing managerial practice.

*Consumer privacy.* With the 2018 emergence of General Data Protection Regulation standards in Europe, the California Consumer Privacy Act becoming law in January 2020, and current debates in Congress on the possibility of a National Commission on Public Privacy, we are witnessing an acceleration in the debate and implementation of privacy policies. The aim is to protect consumers at multiple levels—by including access to personal data (e.g., health records finance), limiting hacking, and, more generally, maintaining personal privacy. A TIU approach would be particularly useful in assessing the trade-offs that consumers are willing to make regarding the balance



of sharing versus protecting their personal information. This is important wherever paradox arises, such when consumers insist on greater protection of personal data while enjoying the benefits of more personally relevant information and firm offerings resulting from firms mining their personal data. A TIU approach can be valuable in surfacing moderators that help consumers resolve such paradoxes.

**Health care policy.** In the United States, a particularly contentious debate is unfolding regarding single-payer systems, the role of government in delivering health care solutions, and the overall cost of health care. While these are large, complex issues, behind the scenes there is a sense that there are two diametrically opposed worldviews that “set context” for the debates. One of the authors of this article has been involved in a TIU project aiming to better understand how Democrats and Republicans view health care disparities to overcome political gridlock. The overall objective was to understand the fundamental frames both groups used to understand health disparities and help develop a campaign that would push the issue forward without alienating either group. It was found that, contrary to public expressions, there were important commonalities as well as differences between the two parties that served as a shared foundation for discussing their differences.

A second health care topic is connected health care. Ensuring that patients take their medicine as prescribed and achieving compliance is both a societal goal and a company goal, but what about consumers’ position? Increasingly the topic of connected health becomes intertwined with privacy concerns. Many firms now remotely monitor patient compliance through medical devices (e.g., sleep apnea machines with embedded chips) and, as a result, the patient, physician, channel intermediaries, and insurance firms all have access to patient data. The overall system improvements—reimbursement based on actual compliance, better patient flow management in doctor’s office, and reduced labor costs for the channel—are all very positive. However, we do not have a deep understanding of the patients’ positive and negative views on connected health care.

**Government involvement and regulation.** Increasingly governments are more involved in the day-to-day affairs of for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Despite the important role that regulation plays in improving the common good (e.g., pollution controls, environmental policies, land protection, water management), there are clear reasons for for-profit firms to oppose these regulations and/or actively lobby against them. These could be for economic reasons (e.g., adverse influence on their profitability) and/or for constituency reasons (e.g., a firm is based in a region that highly depends on that particular industry sector). As noted previously, TIU is particularly useful in situations where stakeholder views may differ—or even collide.

### **Future Research on TIU Methodology**

All research methods, including TIU, merit continual improvement. Each method has strengths and weaknesses in which

further inquiry can refine or enhance strengths and diminish weaknesses. Next, we discuss four areas for future research on the TIU itself.

**Optimal sample size.** What topic and population factors influence desired sample size? When is redundancy in constructs and construct pairing most likely to occur, suggesting that further interviews may not be productive? Rules of thumb vary between 15 and 25 participants, but more systematic clarity is needed. This is critical because travel budgets, transcription costs, and researcher time are typically scarce resources, especially when multiple populations are involved (as is the case with cross-cultural research).

**Eliciting causal connections.** A special value of TIU is its ability to directly elicit the causal mechanisms—the “hows” and “whys” supporting particular construct pairings—present among theory holders. These, of course, are critical to any theory-building enterprise. More R&D is needed to document productive and unproductive elicitation techniques for particular populations and circumstances. For instance, children often have well-developed TIUs, but eliciting them is a special challenge requiring more novel probing and elicitation processes. Separately, some probing techniques may work best in face-to-face interviews but less well for those conducted online. These are all situations requiring more study.

**Alternative probing techniques.** Some topics are inherently more challenging than others for respondents to address. This is especially the case when a topic concerns socially embarrassing issues (e.g., personal hygiene) or involves considerable implicit thinking and tacit knowledge (e.g., knowledge that may not have been given much prior explicit thought by the participant). Such taken-for-granted experiences are circumstances where TIU is especially valuable. Research is needed to identify alternative ways of using TIU interview techniques for such instances.

## **Conclusion**

The TIU approach is ideally suited to surface interesting, novel theories and concepts that can advance *both* marketing practice and scholarship. As such, the overall objective of this article is to inspire and provide guidance on the development of knowledge based on the TIU approach. A key message of this article is that while the TIU approach requires skill, tradecraft, and practice, it has resulted in multiple breakthrough, award-winning research articles (e.g., see Table 2). These articles represent important organic marketing theories that have paved the way for long-lasting research streams that continue to inspire scholarly research today.

While impact may be a sufficient motivation, there are two additional benefits of pursuing this approach. First, researchers using this approach often find that gleaning new insights this way is a special variant of fun. The fun involves the excitement of discovering something novel as well as getting closer to the marketing phenomena. Giving time to executives, consumers,

and policy makers to explore their own thinking is also rewarding. Furthermore, having one's own ideas challenged by interviewees can shake a scholar out of the routine of reviewing literature written by other academics (Moorman et al. 2019a). Second, TIU research not only represents a great vehicle for bringing relevance to the classroom but also provides a platform for sharing real-time stories and challenges that are unfolding in practice. Moreover, in our experience, managers taking part in the research are often excited about the prospect of becoming long-term partners in the research and education process.

In conclusion, if the field of marketing is to continue to have relevance for the practice of marketing, we must develop ideas, concepts, and theories whose central focus is the study of marketing in its natural environment. Within this environment, managers, consumers, and policy makers are a wonderful source of new ideas, unconventional thinking, and ways of working that can fundamentally reshape our current thinking and theories. One can "go it alone" by reading marketing literature and coming up with ideas, or one can capitalize on the knowledge of managers, consumers, and public policy makers who are dealing with significant, underresearched challenges every day. We hope our team experience captured in this article will facilitate your focus on the latter!

### Authors' Note

Author ordering is alphabetical except for the first author, who also served as the team leader.

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