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Choosing “interesting” research methods and facing the challenges of publication

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Abstract

This paper discusses the choice to use two less conventional or “interesting” research methods, Q Methodology and Experience Sampling Method, rather than “status quo” research methods so common in the marketing discipline. It is argued that such methods have value for marketing academics because they widen the potential for discovery. The paper outlines these two research methods, providing examples of how they have been used in an experiential consumption perspective. Additionally the paper identifies some of the challenges to be faced when trying to publish research that use such less conventional methods, as well as offering suggestions to address them.

Choosing “interesting” research methods and facing the challenges for publication

Introduction

It is often argued that a study’s methodology and research design should be selected on the basis that it is the best one to answer the research questions being posed. A cynic, however, could respond that research questions can be posed in ways that automatically affirm the necessity for a status quo quantitative survey that requires analysis with Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Some academic advisors defy this cynicism and believe that a PhD provides opportunities to explore the best methodologies available for the type of research questions being asked. Other academics may then be asked to examine a thesis, or to review a journal paper that does not conform to the tried and trusted approach. What happens then? The purpose of this paper is to open a conversation about the use of less conventional research methods that go beyond the straightforward methodology so often used and published in the marketing discipline’s journals. Two examples, Q-Methodology and Experience Sampling Method, are described here together with brief illustrations of how they have been applied to examine the experiential consumption of mobile phones. The paper also discusses some of the challenges that arise when seeking to publish studies that use these two methods. The term “interesting” has been used in regard to these two methods to reflect the researcher’s view of her experiences from application to a research problem to seeking publication.

Q Methodology (QM)

First introduced by William Stephenson (1953), QM is a distinct orientation towards a systematic study of subjective phenomena such as opinions, attitudes and behaviours (McKeown and Thomas, 1988). It is a research method that provides a way to unravel individuals’ complex subjectivities relating to a topic of interest in order to make their views accessible and rigorously examinable through the statistical techniques (Barry and Proops, 2000; Watts and Stenner, 2005). QM has its origins in psychology but has also been widely used in social and political sciences. While its use in marketing has been more limited, it is heartening to see two papers using QM in the Advances in Consumer Research proceedings for 2009. Additionally, there are there are examples in the Marketing journals, such as: Schultz Kleine et al. (1995 *Journal of Consumer Research*) and Williams and Koepke (2006 *Journal of Consumer Marketing*). The *Journal of Advertising research* has also published studies using this methodology in 1996 and 1999.

QM involves two distinct stages. In the first stage, unstructured data is gathered through interpretive interviews to obtain a wide variation of the discourse or topic of interest. From this interpretive data a number of statements are extracted that reflect, as far as possible, all relevant aspects in the discourse (Barry and Proops, 2000; McKeown and Thomas, 1988). These statements are known as the Q sample. The second stage is called a Q sort, where a fresh sample of respondents sorts the statements in the Q sample according to specific instructions. This new data is keyed into a statistical packaged designed for QM and analysed through using a Q-factor analysis and by examining the results’ factor arrays, which identifies profiles of shared opinions on the topic of interest. It is these factor arrays that form the basis of the data as they are then qualitatively described by the researcher to uncover the nuances that differentiate each profile, derived from the opinions expressed. Justification for using QM is often based on this method’s discovery potential (Shemmer, 2006; Watts and Stenner, 2005). When investigating underdeveloped research areas where the objective is to

understand what views people hold, QM assists researchers to discover the extent to which these views might be shared by others (Barry and Proops, 2000; Watts and Stenner, 2005). As this method is an exploratory technique, an opportunity exists to “bring a sense of coherence to research questions that have potentially complex and socially contested answers” (Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 365).

To illustrate this method in a consumer behaviour context, I applied QM to a study of the experiential consumption of mobile phones in everyday life. As an emerging area of research, the experiential consumption of mobile phones and its extension into the experiential consumption of m-marketing is open to numerous ways of exploration. It was argued, therefore, that there was a need to obtain a rich understanding of how the consumers were behaving, and would behave in the future in response to their situated and contextualised meanings of consuming mobile telephones in their everyday lives). QM not only permitted a qualitative investigation of an individual’s lived experiences, but also offered a way to quantitatively examine these subjective opinions at a collective level to provide insights into their shared meanings (Barry and Proops, 2000). The resulting factor arrays described three profiles of mobile phone consumers based on their perceptions of the experiential value of everyday mobile phone consumption. In the second QM data collection done at the same time the findings identified how individual’s perceptions of mobile marketing strategies can enhance the value perceptions identified in initial three consumer-value profiles.

Experience Sampling Method (ESM)

Research methods involving single surveys are limited in their inability to capture the richness and variability of people’s experiences over periods of time (Kubey, Larson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). However, using an approach such as ESM can overcome this limitation and provide researchers with a way of capturing a wide range of experiential aspects of daily life that is not possible with more traditional research designs (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003). ESM is a-theoretical, making it compatible with many philosophical paradigms and research perspectives (including marketing) because it combines valid field methods with discipline-specific measurement techniques (Kubey *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, the method provides a systematic approach to collecting detailed, subjective data on individuals’ everyday experiences (Bolger *et al.*, 2003; Kubey *et al.*, 1996). For these reasons, ESM has been used in a wide range of organisational and psychosocial research to measure aspects of individuals’ affective and experiential behaviours, such as situations and events that give rise to affective responses in work life (e.g. Fisher, 2000) or in everyday life (e.g. Delespaul, Reis and deVries, 2004).

An ESM study involves alerting participants a number of times each day over a specified period of time. At each alert, participants report on their physical and/or mental activities, providing what is known as momentary assessment data, occurring at or around the time of the interruption and under what conditions. This data is collected using a structured survey instrument called an experience sampling form, which can collect quantitative and/or qualitative data relating to affective and behavioural experiences and the situations or events that are present at that time (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). Electronic pagers or programmable digital watches are most commonly used for alerting participants and paper-based questionnaires are provided in booklet form for the duration of the study. These forms are handed back to the researcher at specified times during the data collection period and the data is entered into a statistical program for analysis (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). With the increased availability of various

forms of interactive communication technologies, greater opportunities exist for researchers to incorporate them into their ESM research designs to achieve more effective ways to collect and collate momentary experience data (Conner Christensen *et al.*, 2003). This is particularly true of mobile phones or hand-held computing technology (Collins, Kashdan and Gollnisch, 2003) that can augment, and in some instances completely replace pen and paper forms of data collection (Conner Christensen *et al.*, 2003; Scollen, Chu and Diener, 2003). However, the possibilities offered through incorporating mobile phone technology into ESM studies remain largely unexplored.

In marketing contexts, ESM is somewhat similar to participant diary methods but is rarely seen in studies that measure more subjective components of consumer behaviour, such as emotions in experiential consumption. ESM studies can help marketing researchers interested in consumers' affective responses to address calls in the literature for more appropriate emotions measures. For example, Erevelles (1998, p. 211) suggests that "more studies using behavioural observations and measuring actual behaviour should be carried out". Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer (1999, p. 202) support this need for improved methods and measurements, arguing that "emotions should be studied more dynamically as they evolve in real time and in context". It is argued therefore, that ESM can help capture people's everyday affective experiences at or around the time they occur and measure them over a longer period of time to determine more effectively which emotional responses are most often experienced and under what circumstances (Bolger *et al.*, 2003).

Relating back to the research context of consumers' experiential consumption of technologies, it has been identified that people experience a range of emotions in their everyday interactions with and use of common domestic technologies (e.g. Mick and Fournier, 1998). However, in the consumer behaviour literature, there is limited research that examines how different situations and events in the everyday experiential consumption of mobile phones might elicit both positive and negative emotions (Moisio, 2003). An illustration of how ESM can be applied in a consumer behaviour context is provided. I developed a study that had two purposes: 1) to develop an ESM research design that used the mobile phone to both alert the participants and to facilitate the data collection; 2) to examine momentary affective data regarding consumers' emotions arising from the everyday ownership and use of their mobile phones, including any interactions with mobile marketing communications. The study's findings identified a number of positive and negative emotions, collected over a seven day period, which arose from different situations where the mobile phone was used. Additionally, the study demonstrated the feasibility of using the mobile phone for collecting momentary affective data within an ESM methodology.

Facing the Challenges for Publication

With any empirical research using less conventional or "interesting" research methods, there are (hopefully) two directions for papers that arise from the study. First, there is a paper that would emphasise the methodology and research design with the purpose of opening or expanding initial conversations about its usefulness for studying aspects of marketing and/or consumer behaviour. The second direction could focus on the findings of the study, with less emphasis on the methods used. Since QM and ESM have not had much exposure in marketing or consumer behaviour research, researchers may have problems finding a discipline-relevant journal that is open to publishing such papers, particularly when the paper focuses on the methodology and research design. It is suggested that the researcher initially undertakes a

thorough review of different marketing publications to see whether the research method has been used in published papers and how it has been written up. In the event that the research method has not been used, it is suggested that the researcher communicates with journal editors to see whether such a paper would be of interest. Failing this, the researcher might consider submitting the paper, possibly after downplaying some of its marketing aspects, to a suitable non-discipline journal, particularly ones that published the articles that helped to inform the development of the study. Such an approach is considered a trade-off between getting a publishing track record underway and getting acknowledged in the marketing discipline.

Every paper submitted for publication has to be reviewed. Thus, addressing reviewers' comments, which may or may not be based on a sound understanding of the methodology involved, is also part of the challenge for researchers who choose to use "interesting" research methods such as QM or ESM. When the paper focuses on the "interesting" methodology and research design in terms of how it improves the gaining of knowledge or provides additional benefits for researchers, the reviewers may argue that the researcher need to compare and contrast it with traditional methods. For example, reviewers may require the author of a paper about an ESM research design that incorporates hand-held mobile computing technology for alerts and data collection to demonstrate how this approach is an improvement over the traditional use of pagers and paper-based data collection methods. If no comparative study of methods was undertaken at the time of research, there is a problem addressing the reviewer's concerns. Under these circumstances, a thorough demonstration of how the key methodological issues in ESM research were addressed, namely recruitment and retention, motivation and compliance, and data quality (Bolger *et al.*, 2003) becomes important. Being able to compare and contrast these issues against published papers' outcomes would help to give the paper more credibility in terms of some of the claims that the author may make regarding the method's benefits.

When writing up a paper that focuses on the actual study a researcher can get caught up in the need to sufficiently explain the method in the first iteration (ostensibly so that the reviewers can follow the steps if they are not familiar with it). This of course takes up valuable space that could be used more profitably to explore the study's contributions to theory and practice. As a result, there is the danger of reviewers commenting that the relevant section has turned into "Research Methods 101" and hinting at a somewhat puerile approach by the researcher. The issue that is particularly prevalent with a QM study is that not many marketing academics (and by implication, reviewers) are aware of this approach. Consequently, reviewers will compare a Q Methodology to an R Methodology, which is understandable if this is what they know best. Thus, comments are made regarding sample size, (which are acceptably small in QM studies), or construct measurement issues in terms of validity and reliability (when QM does not seek to "measure" anything but to determine how opinions are shared at a collective level). And of course there is always the generalisability of findings particularly with regard to small sample size (although QM studies that have been conducted in different geographical areas have produced very similar results since they focus on shared opinions of the topic of interest).

To overcome these issues, the author must fully understand how to defend their QM study in the light of the R Methodology issues likely to be raised and to provide relevant citations to "prove" the reliability and validity of both the method and the findings. A strategy to somewhat circumvent these issues is to send the contact details of authors who have published QM studies to the journal's editor at the time of submitting the article, and suggesting them as

supplementary reviewers based on their relevant expertise. This way the researcher can hope to get a more knowledgeable review of the value of the method and their findings, which the editor can then balance against a review that demonstrates limited knowledge of the method being used.

Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of this paper was to open a conversation about choosing to use “interesting” research methods, such as QM and ESM, rather than conventional ones. However, it is not possible to discuss all the issues involved, or to predict the full gamut of challenges that researchers may face. What is argued though is that there are opportunities for future research that applies these methods, since both have great potential to investigate consumer behaviour or marketing issues in many areas of interest to provide new or richer knowledge. Examples include experiential behaviour through ownership and use of products; attitudes and beliefs about services or service delivery. They can be used to explore consumer emotions, or other affective behaviours of interest, such as brand attachment or nostalgia. In closing, researchers and PhD students are urged to consider whether rigorous adherence to conventional research methods hampers opportunities for creativity in academic pursuits of knowledge, or far worse, may limit what can be known about particular marketing phenomena of interest.

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