Qualitative research issues at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface

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Discusses the emergence of qualitative research in the context of research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. Debates which qualitative methods for data collection and analysis are relevant to research in this area. In consideration of this, discusses three topical approaches to research: applying the principles of grounded theory; utilizing computer software in data analysis and theory development; and developing a "stream" of research, combining various qualitative and quantitative methods. Drawing on the logic of the "stream" of research, offers a radical approach which reflects the intuitive research process employed by entrepreneurs. Argues that this might be adopted for qualitative academic research.

Background

As the marketing discipline moves to strengthen its interdisciplinary ties, research examining issues at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface has emerged as a rapidly developing area. The marketing/entrepreneurship interface brings together researchers who have an affinity and understanding of the rich heritage of both marketing and entrepreneurship. While both literatures have their own distinctive characteristics, the interface recognizes substantial commonality between the two.

Research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface is typified by growth and interaction. This dynamic has been best manifested in literature such as the UIC/AMA Research at the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface Conference Proceedings, where, between 1987 and 1994, 194 articles were published. These articles range from exploratory to explanatory pieces and conceptual to contemplative. They form the core of the "state-of-the-art" research in the area.

Approaches to research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface

As discussed by Hofer and Bygrave (1992), the entrepreneurial process involves a change of state and discontinuity, and is holistic and dynamic. It is said to be unique, involving numerous antecedent variables, and generating outcomes that are extremely sensitive to the initial conditions of those variables. Given these characteristics, it is perhaps not surprising that Hills and LaForge (1992) draw a number of distinct parallels between the entrepreneur and marketing disciplines. For example, both areas emphasize behavioural processes and innovation, share a common underlying philosophy (pertaining to the market and customer), and draw from multidisciplinary theoretical foundations.

These commonalities suggest that research models and processes appropriate to the marketing discipline may well be applied and/or adapted to the area of entrepreneurship (and vice versa).

The question then is raised: what is the best way to conduct research in emerging areas such as that of the marketing/entrepreneurship interface? According to Zinkhan and Hirschheim (1992):

Science uses whatever tools, techniques, and approaches are considered appropriate for the particular subject matter under study.

One approach to research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface focuses on confirmation and justification, following a deductive, deterministic model of inquiry. In support of this view, Wortman et al. (1989) call for enhanced methodological rigour when studying the interface, involving improved hypothesis testing and representative sampling, adequate sample sizes, and appropriate statistical treatments. Following from this, they suggest that qualitative techniques such as interviews are "costly, time-consuming, and geographically constraining", and should be reserved for gathering supportive and corroborative data, or exploratory designs.

If, however, as Hills and LaForge (1992) claim, research at the interface falls into the "school of discovery", the more appropriate research approach involves qualitatively seeking to identify suitable variables and their relevant patterns and processes. From this basis, the researcher may begin to develop propositions and hypotheses concerning a "reality", then lead to theory development.

This approach to research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface is supported by researchers who call for increased use of qualitative and depth field work (e.g. Churchill, 1992; Van de Ven, 1992) with Aldrich (1992) stating:
... entrepreneurship research is still very much a mono-method field, in spite of repeated calls for the field to free itself from dependence on mailed surveys and related questionnaire-based methods.

To this end, Stewart (1991) suggests drawing upon anthropological research methods (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory, and field research) to help develop theory. Also, Morris and Stenberg (1991) suggest that firms should be examined in the context of their unique setting, especially when there are multiple influences on entrepreneurial processes.

Clearly, there is a wide variety of research methods and tools available to researchers at the interface, albeit most stem from social science. If, as proposed by Hills and LaForge (1992), interface researchers should be striving towards developing an integrated theoretical framework, researchers need to be aware of which methods have been used to date, and which are appropriate as they try to develop a more integrated, holistic theory specific to the marketing/entrepreneurship interface.

As summarized by Carson and Coviello (1995), both deductive and inductive approaches are in evidence, with the historical bedrock of interface research stemming from the “school of justification”. That is, it is concerned largely with validity and confirmation. As a result, much of the research has been focused on reciprocal and replicating studies, designed to test and confirm the general literature pertaining to principles of management and decision making, structures of management and organization, and managerial processes, in the context of the marketing/entrepreneurship interface and entrepreneurial firms. This is perhaps a reflection of the disciplinary focus and training of early researchers at the interface, in that their aim was often to prove that entrepreneurial processes were “different”.

At the same time, there appears to be a growing trend away from deductive approaches, and towards inductive research. As a reflection of this, there is an increasing focus on research designs which are descriptive and case-study-based, and a decline in designs seeking to prove, for example, cause and effect relationships (Carson and Coviello, 1995). In the broadest sense, the interface literature has begun to show an expansion in the use of qualitative research, focused on “understanding” phenomena and describing both the meaning and implications of events. While marketing/entrepreneurship interface research has tended historically to focus on the microdimensions of marketing and entrepreneurship at the level of the firm and the decision maker, it now emphasizes “new frontiers” related to firm behaviours and relationships, industrial and social networks, and entrepreneurial and marketing competences.

As a result two distinct strands of research activity at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface have emerged, with research focusing on: validity and confirmation; or identifying new concepts, constructs, or paradigms. In future, it is likely that both categories of research will continue to develop as the research area as a whole matures. It can also be expected that there will be increasing cross-fertilization between the two categories, as well as the emergence of new concepts and areas of interest. This will probably follow from literature developments in other disciplines, combined with managerial practice.

Methodologically, as research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface develops, there is opportunity to exploit the emerging trend towards qualitative research. As the use of qualitative research increases, so too will the range and variety of qualitative methods and tools. Generally, research methods from the social sciences will be employed, ranging from ethnographic traditions to clinical and grounded theory approaches.

Although arguments as to the “best” or most appropriate approach will continue, there is no doubt that qualitative methods have much to offer researchers in this field, particularly in terms of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. Hofer and Bygrave (1992) state that:

The fact that the entrepreneurial process involves changes of stage, discontinuities, and dynamic, holistic processes suggests that studies of these processes should be longitudinal in character.

This is compounded by interface researchers being driven by the need to be relevant, and therefore pragmatic. The question therefore remains, which methods for data collection and analysis are relevant for research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface? Or as captured by Zelditch (1962): “... what do you do if you prefer data that are real, deep, and hard?” While a variety of qualitative research methods have been advocated in some areas of marketing, principally and predominantly in the field of consumer studies, it is not widely, indeed even marginally, accepted in research into mainstream marketing decision making and particularly at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface.

There are many qualitative methods worthy of debate, but three approaches based in the social science research literature have been the focus of discussion at various
Article: Planning Marketing Intelligence & entrepreneurship interface

Qualitative research

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Having the researcher periodically step back also allows for theoretical sensitivity by regarding all theoretical explanations as provisional; and following clearly defined research procedures.

Clearly, the grounded theory method has many attributes conducive to sound research in areas such as the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. However, there are a number of issues that should be considered prior to its application.

First, for a researcher to develop reliable concepts and constructs from the data, s/he must have considerable experience or knowledge in the topic area. It is this experience which allows the researcher to evaluate data correctly and effectively. If this premise is accepted, then the grounded theory method would present considerable difficulty for the researcher who has little or no experience with a topic, and such a researcher would be dangerously exposed to misinterpretation of data. At the marketing/entrepreneurship interface, researchers attempting to utilize the grounded theory method will need, at the very least, competency skills such as knowledge and experience of the interface. Otherwise, researchers may rely on either knowledge or experience in either marketing or entrepreneurship and fail to address the interface linkage. Knowledge and experience are competences which were implicit in Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original research. Although the approach was offered as a social science method, the original research was carried out in an environment about which both authors were substantially knowledgeable and experienced.

Second, using the grounded theory approach also requires the researcher to be simultaneously open-minded and sceptical regarding the data. A part from the apparent paradox presented by these two dimensions, it is difficult to imagine how a researcher, who has the necessary experience in a topic area, can be entirely open-minded on data issues. Being human, it is perhaps inevitable that prior experience will lead to judgemental interpretations based on his/her expertise.

Finally, a technical concern with the grounded theory method relates to the rigidity of the coding system. This rigidity may inhibit rather than facilitate data evaluation, since it forces the "experienced" researcher into unnecessary and restrictive steps (as perceived by that researcher), and may in fact suppress some of the richness of evaluation. In addition, the coding procedures can sometimes raise unnecessary issues, especially for the inexperienced researcher. This can lead to overly complex analysis, causing the...
researcher to follow multiple paths or levels of investigation which may not in fact be the focus of the research. While it is recognized that coding procedures introduce a laudable rigour to the research method, it might be questioned as to whether such rigour is necessary or appropriate in all qualitative research, particularly when trying to understand the subtleties underlying, for example, decision-making processes in a marketing/entrepreneurship context.

In conclusion, it is acknowledged that the grounded theory method may be useful in qualitative research, particularly as it contributes a degree of research rigour. However, it is a method which is perhaps best employed by a qualitative researcher who is a phenomenologist by training, since such a researcher will be comfortable with the logic of the method employed. For those researchers who are not phenomenologists by heart or nature, it might be more productive to apply creative or lateral thinking to data interpretation.

This may be especially relevant in the context of researching entrepreneurs, who, it is recognized, are not susceptible to conformity and rigour. Overall, it may be fundamentally unnecessary and inappropriate to apply a method with rigour (such as grounded theory) in relation to a subject (such as marketing/entrepreneurship processes) which may be inherently without rigour.

Approach 2: applying computer software for analysis and theory building
It has long been recognized that the scourge of qualitative research is the tedious and sometimes monotonous analysis and interpretation of vast quantities of "soft", largely unstructured data. While various tools to data analysis have been offered (Miles and Huberman, 1994), advances in information technology have led to the development of innovative software packages designed to facilitate data analysis (e.g. Ethnograph, NUDIST, and Metamorph). The software developed to date consists of both generic packages and those specifically developed for the needs of qualitative researchers. The former simply function to retrieve keywords or manage the text base, while the latter are designed to "code and retrieve" data, build theory, or develop conceptual networks. Some programs are able to perform only the first level of analysis, while others are capable of much more (see Miles and Huberman (1994) for a review of different packages).

Overall, software packages are particularly useful where there is a large quantity of data requiring coding, annotation, linking, search and retrieval, development of data displays, etc. However, there is a variety of practical issues to be considered before making the decision to use software in qualitative data analysis.

First, to run in an effective and efficient manner, certain packages need careful pre-coding of the data in order to identify and recognize keywords, phrases, and passages. Where there is a large amount of data, this can be an extremely time-consuming process.

Second, the researcher needs to have an intimate personal knowledge of the data, so that appropriate trigger codes and responses can be inserted at the outset of data interpretation. Such knowledge can best come from personal involvement in the entire process, from data collection through to analysis. If there are multiple researchers located in different locations (e.g. internationally), it is also unrealistic to expect the entire research team to have "intimate personal knowledge" of all the data (including how the qualitative data have been interpreted and transformed). The question therefore arises as to whether the software in fact aids data analysis or simply adds another step in the process.

Overall, it is likely that computer-aided analysis is at best a useful and sometimes additional "first cut" evaluation of the data. While it allows the researcher to organize the data, confirm broad assumptions and identify emerging patterns, it will not generate the richness of interpretive understanding, necessary at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. This can come only from intimate appreciation of the inherent nuances of meaning.

Approach 3: developing a "stream" of research
To combat methodological problems associated with entrepreneurship research, Davis et al. (1985) suggest that a "... stream of research" is needed. This implies that individual studies are carefully designed to build on what has been learned in previous studies. In this way, different methodological approaches can be tested, avoiding the discontinuity provided by individual, isolated investigations. Such a stream of research could be achieved by integrating (for example):

- Case studies of successful and unsuccessful entrepreneurial marketers.
- Small-scale exploratory or cross-sectoral studies to test different methodologies.
- Large-scale survey research to study relevant marketing/entrepreneurship interface issues on both a cross-sectoral and longitudinal basis.
- Controlled field studies to enable the study of causal relationships.
The cornerstone of the “stream of research” approach is that it allows the researcher to combine the “best” and most suitable research methods from the social sciences at specific and appropriate stages of the research. This approach therefore negates many of the deficiencies of a single research method, identified by Carson and Coviello (1995) to be a major weakness in the interface literature. At the same time, researchers need to be cognizant of the differences associated with managing comparative interpretation of data, gathered by the different methods, perhaps over time.

Summary
The three approaches debated so far in this paper have significant justification for use in research. There are, however, some concerns as to their appropriateness for research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. Whatever their appropriateness, the major concern is: do they allow for the progression of the knowledge and understanding of the phenomena in question? (cf. Gibb and Davies, 1990).

Since, as stated earlier, much of the research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface is about understanding phenomena, the closer the researcher gets to the phenomenon, the clearer it is understood. In order to achieve this, qualitative researchers might employ a variety of methods that follow the “stream of research” notion, but they should view the research in a totally integrative manner, rather than a step-wise progression from qualitative to quantitative. Thus, the researcher might simultaneously combine a selection of methods such that a “pool” of knowledge develops. This approach would integrate and adapt a range of methods as appropriate, thereby capitalizing on resource and research synergy.

It might be argued that this is a triangulation of a sort, as propositioned by Deshpande (1983), but the approach goes much further. The proposition here is that no single method of social science research is wholly appropriate in providing the depth, breadth and subtlety of information necessary for examining the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. Of course, any one method may allow the researcher to reach meaningful conclusions, but it is contended here that an integrated combination of compatible and complementary methods will yield substantially more satisfying results. If we can learn from marketing, the view of Zinkhan and Hirschheim (1992) is relevant:

Too often in marketing we undertake research projects to investigate the relationships between isolated variables and we do not make an attempt to integrate our findings into an overall framework. If we are to advance marketing knowledge, we must make our theories and models explicit and we must carry out integrated research programs with an aim to discover underlying causal structures and generative mechanisms. We need theories that really explain, rather than merely describe.

It will be observed that this integrated approach resembles the process by which the practitioner achieves a level of knowledge and understanding acceptable to him/her. For example, marketing practitioners, and in particular entrepreneurs, intuitively practice such a philosophy. They are not encumbered by rules, rigours and restrictions when conducting research for their business and in fact, collect and analyse information in a “naturalistic” manner. This point is well documented in the debates surrounding the variances and even dichotomies between academic marketing theory and marketing practice. This leads to the question: what can academic researchers learn from the approaches used by practitioners? To answer this, we offer a research approach which acknowledges the potential to combine “academic” research with “practitioner” research.

Approach 4: linking academic research with “artistic” practitioner research
The basis of the approach proposed here stems from the long-running debate in many academic circles, particularly so in marketing, about whether marketing is a “science” or an “art”. It is not the purpose of this paper, or the desire of the authors, belatedly to enter into this debate.

The approach proposed here is not yet another denouncement of scientific marketing philosophy in favour of the extreme postmodern marketer’s extolment of art and the artisan as the panacea of marketing thought. In fact, the proposal acknowledges the strength and existence of a scientific marketing philosophy. However, it is contended that “scientific” marketers/academics often display an arrogant disdain for marketing practitioners. An example of such disdain is ably described by Brown (1996) when criticizing marketing scientists for chasing the holy grail of marketing scientific theory. Brown argues that:

...the single-minded pursuit of this noble aspiration has taken longer than we anticipated and, indeed, may take a tad more time to come to fruition, but the ultimate fruits of our labours – the bright shining Science of Marketing – will make all the sacrifices worthwhile. In the meantime, we can attempt to mollify marketing practitioners (and our cerebrally challenged academic...
peers) by publishing periodic bulletins in the burgeoning number of "managerially orientated magazines", the subtext of which seems to comprise "we know you cretins can't understand a word of JMR, but lest you conclude that cutting-edge marketing thinkers have lost the common touch, here's the low brow, bullet-pointed, God-but-you're-thick version of where we're at (p. 14).

Academic marketing research, whether from the stance of realism or relativism, in some ways acknowledges that there is a void between marketing academics and marketing practitioners. Indeed, Brown (1996) explicitly acknowledges this when stating, "If anything, our unending search for the impossible intellectual dream has only served to distance us from, and diminished our standing in the eyes of, those front-line foot-soldiers who battle daily in the marketing management trenches". It is this "void" which this proposed "linkage" here attempts to address, in the context of the marketing/entrepreneurship interface.

In relation to education, much of the foundation philosophy of marketing research programmes in university education stems from the rigour required by "academic" social science research. A basic tenet is that, if research is to be considered valid, it must be "scientific" and carried out with a discipline and rigour which emphasizes objectivity and validity, and shows clearly cause and effect. As a consequence, much of the teaching curriculum focuses on methodologies and how they must be performed "correctly". Similarly, emphasis is often placed on the "one best method" for a particular piece of research, even to the point of underlining the difficulties and complexities of using more than one method.

However, marketing practitioners and particularly entrepreneurs and owner/managers of small businesses do not carry out research in this manner. Instead, they take a naturalistic, even artistic approach to gathering market information. The definition here of "artistic" implicitly acknowledges that artistic observations and actions are, according to Anderson (1983), "... always interpreted in the context of a priori knowledge", and similarly supported by Kuhn (1970) when he states: "What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see". Therefore, "artistic" in this sense relates to the notion that practitioner research will be uniquely created by the individual and related specifically to his/her company. Interpretation of findings (generally gathered haphazardly, spontaneously, opportunistically and personally), will be perceived in terms of significance and meaning, uniquely by that individual. As in art, interpretation is individualistically in the "eye of the beholder", whether this is the artist who created the piece or the viewer of the piece.

This description and its variance from "science" is more comprehensively described by Eisner (1985) who, in an evaluation of the differences between artistic and scientific approaches to qualitative research, identified and described ten key factors. These are admirably summarized by Brown (1996) and illustrated in Table I in order to underpin the above arguments.

Practitioner market research will use any method at its disposal, regardless of correctness and compatibility. Typically, a practitioner will gather information from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways. The concepts of rigour and validity seldom enter into the mind-frame. The practitioner will have a "feel" for the value and usefulness of information and its source and will intuitively accept or reject information as it is gathered. Much of the information gathering (note the use of the term "information gathering" as opposed to market research) may well be unstructured and without a single specific purpose.

Table I illustrates clearly the void in both approach and thinking between academics and practitioners. The question becomes: how can marketing academics make research more practitioner "real", while not rejecting the characteristics of "academic" social science research, particularly its rigour and validity? Can academic researchers accommodate the ethos of "practitioner" research? This would require acceptance of the view that interpretation of findings is entirely personal for the purpose of understanding in a business context and this understanding is precisely personal, in terms of it relating to a practitioner's business. Equally, might academic researchers accept the approach of using and/or adopting any research method with which the researcher is comfortable and which he/she chooses to use out of convenience or expediency? This is unclear because social science research fails to recognize that market information is of a unique value to an individual and his/her company.

However, if such a notion is accepted, what might practitioner-related academic research look like and what problems, if any, would ensue? Since the research would reflect the unique situation and context of the research problem, its distinct characteristics are difficult to define, but if the uniqueness of such research in practice is accepted, then this is not an issue. Of course, this gives rise to concerns regarding the validity of the research.
If, however, the practitioner research approach can be linked in some manner with integrated, multimethod academic research, some concerns may be overcome. This is a particularly important issue at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. Thus, the onus is on academics at the interface to soften current and established philosophies and to encompass a “practitioner philosophy” which is naturalistic and perhaps inherently artistic. This is not an impossible notion; after all, “art” may be based on forms and structures, and on perspectives and views, but the individual outcomes are still essentially singularly creative with unique circumstances in mind.

**Conclusions**

This paper discusses a variety of qualitative research approaches in the context of a rapidly emerging area of research interest: the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. Application of the principles of grounded theory, using computer software in data analysis and theory building, and developing a combined method/“stream” approach to research are all discussed, and their relative strengths and weaknesses noted.

Regardless of approach, the critical issue to be addressed by researchers is one of integration, where both the research problem and method are viewed holistically, in an effort to allow for progression of knowledge and understanding of the phenomena in question. To this end, the paper introduces a radical research approach, attempting to accommodate the intuitive practitioner research of the entrepreneur with aspects of the academic process. More specifically, it is recommended that “real” research in emerging areas such as the marketing/entrepreneurship interface,

### Table 1

**Differences between scientific and artistic approaches to research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mode of representation</td>
<td>Formal statements; literal language</td>
<td>Non-literary language; evocative statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal criteria</td>
<td>Validity paramount; unbiased methods of data collection and analysis; conclusions supported by evidence</td>
<td>Persuasiveness paramount; seek illumination, penetration and insight; arguments supported by success in shaping concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point of focus</td>
<td>Concentrates on overt or expressed behaviour (which can be recorded, counted and analysed)</td>
<td>Concentrates on experience and meanings (observed behaviour provides springboard to understanding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of generalization</td>
<td>Extrapolates from particular to general; randomly drawn sample is deemed representative of universe and statistically significant inferences drawn about latter from former</td>
<td>Studies single cases and the idiosyncratic, but presupposes that generalizations reside in the particular, that broad (if not statistically significant) lessons can be learned from the unique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of form</td>
<td>Results reported in neutral, unembellished manner (third person, past tense) and according to a standard format (problem, literature review, sample, analysis, implications)</td>
<td>Avoidance of standardization; form and content interact; meaning of content determined by form in which it is expressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of licence</td>
<td>Factual emphasis; little scope for personal expression or flights of imaginative fancy</td>
<td>Subjective orientation; imaginative self-expression both permitted and expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction and control</td>
<td>Aims to anticipate the future accurately, thus enabling or facilitating its control</td>
<td>Aims to explicate, thereby increasing understanding; less algorithmic than heuristic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of data</td>
<td>Standardized instruments, such as questionnaire surveys or observation schedules, used to collect data</td>
<td>The investigator is the principal research instrument and his or her experiences the major source of data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of knowing</td>
<td>Methodological monism; only formal propositions provide knowledge (affect and cognition separate)</td>
<td>Methodological pluralism; knowledge conveyed by successful evocation of experience in question (affect and cognition combined)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate aims</td>
<td>Discovery of truth and laws of nature; propositions taken to be true when they correspond with the reality they seek to explain</td>
<td>Creation of meaning and generation of understanding; statements seek to alter extant perceptions about the world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Brown (1996), originally adapted from Eisner (1985)
should reflect the ethos of the practitioner’s natural or “artistic” research method. Enlightened educators have long recognized the need to adapt marketing techniques and teaching approaches to suit the entrepreneurial context, and such consideration is long overdue in our approach to research design and analysis.

References


