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Qualitative versus Quantitative Research Methods: Discovery or Justification?

In this paper, the author discusses the different perspectives on qualitative and quantitative research methods in terms of discovery and justification, which are discussed by Hunt (1991) in his famous marketing theory textbook. There is a growing consensus that the quantitative research method plays a crucial role in the justification of research, and that qualitative methods are not good for justification but are excellent for discovery. However, previous research has not provided enough meaningful comparison of the two different methods, especially in marketing contexts. Therefore, this paper aims to address these issues by reviewing previous studies, discussing some concerns about the two methods, and proposing some valuable insights for conducting research with the two methods.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Quantitative Research, Marketing Theory, Marketing Thought.

What are the Matters at Hand?

The debate on the correct methodology for social research has now spanned several decades, with the proponents of qualitative and quantitative approaches forming prominent camps in the ongoing paradigm controversy. In many studies, qualitative and quantitative methods have been used together in the same research project; in many cases, such an integration has resulted in illuminating insights about the investigated social phenomena (Cresswell 1994). However, many researchers have focused on quantitative methods for their research, not considering whether the intention was discovery or justification of facts or theory.

Hunt (1991) defined the terms discovery and justification in his famous book, “Modern Marketing Theory.” He suggested that there are four procedures for discovering empirical generalizations, laws, and theories: observation, speculation, Eureka, and dreams. He said that these procedures are simply illustrative and by no means exhaustive possibilities. Then, he argued that there are a variety of issues involved in justification, which again do not exhaust the subject: empirical testing, formalization, and research hypotheses. After discussing the logic of discovery and justification, he concluded that there is no single logic of discovery, while there is only one logic of justification that is common to all science. What was this logic of justification? Why did he argue that there does exist a single logic of justification?

Quantitative and qualitative methods are generally practiced by scholars from radically different disciplines, and it is assumed “that the claim of compatibility, let alone one of synthesis, cannot be sustained” (Smith and Heshuisi 1986, p.4). Lincoln and Guba (2000) have similarly argued that the ontological foundations of the positivist and interpretivist paradigms that underlie these methods are fundamentally incommensurable.

Any serious methodological consideration of the framework of any science should, however, first consider the nature of the investigated phenomenon and thereafter address the question of which method is adequate to describe, explain, or understand the phenomenon. Thus, methodological concepts alone cannot answer questions like “Which method should be used for the investigation of social and societal phenomena, and should qualitative and quantitative methods be integrated in this endeavor?” Instead of basing discussions about an adequate methodology for the social sciences exclusively on an abstract methodological and epistemological level, it might be more helpful to combine methodological and substantial considerations by examining the usefulness of methodological concepts with the help of examples from research practice (Smith and Heshuisi 1986).

The Objectives of the Paper

One purpose of this paper is to evaluate the concepts of "discovery” and “justification,” which have often been used to account for the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in marketing. Also, I discuss the issue of single justification logic and give some examples of this single justification. Another goal is to demonstrate the complementary roles of quantitative and qualitative methods in the analysis of social phenomena.