

Strategies for consumer research



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Consumer research is a type of applied sociology that attempts to map and understand the way in which consumers behave and make decisions about the products that they purchase. This is absolutely fundamental to those managing marketing processes for an organisation. Understanding how consumers make the decision to purchase a particular item of goods or service is vital to the setting out of marketing plans for products. The research will also discover which marketing approaches are the most successful and, therefore, which ones should be repeated to attract attention [1]. Typically, this type of research is statistical in nature, pulling together all of the decision inputs that consumers will look at, before making decisions [2]. For example, factors such as availability, price, likely value growth and functionality will all play an important role in terms of consumer decision making. Traditional consumer research aims to be entirely objective in nature and is undertaken in an impartial manner, attempting to form an understanding of the actual state of affairs in the given product market. However, more recently, there has been recognition that many consumers will simply make impulse purchases and that one specific set of inputs will not always produce the same result, as human perceptions and decision making processes vary considerably from individual to individual, depending on a range of factors that cannot be neatly placed into a scientific analysis [3].

Essentially, there are two key approaches to consumer research which are recognised and discussed in the research paper by Isabelle Szmigin and Gordon Foxall. Traditionally, consumer research theorists have argued that consumer research must naturally either centre on the interpretive approach

or the positivist approach ^[4]. Szmigin and Foxall argued that a combination of the two approaches will produce the best approach. Critically, Szmigin and Foxall recognise that the real value in consumer research comes from the quality of the information that the research gives to the managers making the ongoing marketing decisions. This has arguably been a massively overlooked factor in consumer research. The ultimate goal for consumer research should surely be to give a definitive course of action for a marketing department to follow in order to gain the maximum possible consumer penetration. By arguing this point, Szmigin and Foxall successfully demonstrate that the ideal form of consumer research must take account of both scientific, objective decision making factors as well as the subjective and emotional decision making factors, if it is to gain a detailed and inclusive understanding of consumer behaviour ^[5]. There are arguably inherent positives and negatives to both approaches and these are discussed by Szmigin and Foxall, with varying degrees of conviction. Ultimately, however, the authors failed to reach a final conclusion as to which method offered the better approach and instead opted to conclude that a middle ground would be the best approach. In this paper, the question as to whether this conclusion is a true reflection of the position or whether the authors simply failed to find conclusive evidence and were thus forced to reach this conclusion due to the absence of any convincing suggestions to the contrary is evident ^[6].

Interpretive v Positivism

The two different approaches under discussion are interpretative and positivistic, although it could also be seen as a debate between science and art ^[7]. Similarly, positivistic consumer research is more commonly referred to as quantitative research and interpretative research is referred to as qualitative research. This is a direct reflection of the statistical importance of the positivistic approach. With the positivist approach, a large group of individuals is studied with an attempt to draw one conclusive set of statistics that explain all consumer behaviour. The focus is very much on the four Ps, namely product, price, place or location and promotion. In the positivist approach, the basis for the research is that the four Ps will be the underlying factors that will make up the decision making process for consumers. These are all objective factors and take little or no account of dealing with personal preferences as displayed by individual consumers. During this process, a hypothesis is drawn up which essentially sets out the claims which the research aims either to prove or disprove.

This positivist approach is heavily statistically based and the questioning of consumers will aim towards gaining figure based results that can be displayed in the form of graphs. Similarly, the reliability of the findings is tested by statistical methods including ascertaining the significance level of the data.

Whilst this method is seen as being potentially conclusive and providing statistical data that can be used in marketing techniques, it fundamentally misses the fact that humans behave in different ways even when faced with the same raw data. Different consumers will make different decisions and will place different relative values on the input factors detailed above.

Interpretative research aims to take this factor into account. Research is focussed on a smaller group of individuals with the aim of mapping out consumer behaviour based on a range of more subjective factors such as those relating to cultural and sociological impacts ^[8]. With this approach, however, the personality and subjective beliefs of the researcher are much more likely to have an impact on the results of the research. Personalities and subjective thoughts will naturally vary depending on the consumer's values and, with this in mind, there is a serious question as to what value this type of research can offer to marketing professionals within a company. Without any statistical patterns of behaviour, it can be very difficult for marketing professionals to determine a set of trends that can be accurately relied upon ^[9].

Interpretative Approach Analysis Based on Szmigin and Foxall's Research

Szmigin and Foxall spent a large amount of their analysis considering whether the interpretative value has any merit and what it can offer in terms of additional value that this method offers the process of consumer research. Szmigin and Foxall recognised that papers relating to interpretative research are often seen as peripheral to positivistic research, offering little in the way of added value. This is, however, rightly discarded by the authors.

The paper explains the concepts that have been developed surrounding the use of interpretative research. One of the most formative of these concepts is that indicated by Thompson ^[10], that interpretative research will come up with multiple possible worldviews rather than one individual 'way of the world', which was distinct from the positivistic approach. One of the central

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points determined by Szmigin and Foxall was that the interpretative approach accurately represented the complexities of human nature and that failure to consider this was a fatal flaw in the traditional positivistic approach [11] .

Interestingly, the approach taken by Szmigin and Foxall, on the one hand, recognised the absolutely vital elements that the interpretative approach bring to the phenomenon that is essential for the complete understanding of consumer behaviour, but also gives credence to the way in which this approach is too value laden and thus not entirely reliable as a source of information for marketing professionals. The weakness of allowing subjective and internal states of the consumers to be taken into account is widely accepted by Szmigin and Foxall, yet despite this, there is a refusal to write off this approach, entirely [12] .

One possible way of reconciling these opposing thoughts is that of considering the interpretative research methods as a way of ascertaining a range of several possible causes of action based on the range of potential consumer thought patterns from which positivistic research approaches can be used to narrow down the data into a more useful set of conclusions. It is this combination of the two approaches that Szmigin and Foxall focus on in reaching their conclusion. The approach, on the face of it, appears to be entirely logical given the data available.

A Further Look at Interpretative Research

Before simply accepting the proposition that the interpretative research approach offers additional supporting information to the more traditional approach, a greater analysis of the potential added value that can be obtained through the use of interpretative research is required. Klein & Myers ^[13] argued that interpretative research is simply a way by which knowledge is obtained through consumer research. Rather than seeing interpretative research as a distinct method of conducting consumer research, it may be viewed as a way of filtering the information gathered through a set of cultural and social parameters. Interpretative research does not involve the pre-setting of parameters or any other variables; instead, it lets the social context influence the phenomenon.

It seems that the approach of combining the two theories is powerful, but not in the way that Szmigin and Foxall identified. A paper by Bruce Rowlands ^[14] also explored the issue of the relative use of interpretative and positivistic approaches. However, in this case, it was concluded that the combination of the two approaches would be valuable but not simply because no conclusive conclusion relating to the choice of one over the other could be reached, but rather due to the fact that combining the two approaches can achieve the best of both worlds, in certain circumstances. In this case, it was held that the two approaches worked well together where the non constrained interpretative approach can be used within at least a certain set of boundaries (albeit loosely defined) ^[15] .

Critically, this paper recognised that the problem with interpretative research is that reaching a meaningful conclusion can be virtually

impossible, in many situations. This is down to the potential width of results that such an untargeted approach can cause. However, in this paper it was concluded by Bruce Rowlands that this difficulty could largely be overcome by setting at least basic parameters to guide the research in the first instance to ensure a degree of control in the research process [16].

By combining the findings of the Bruce Rowlands paper and that of the paper under current discussion, it is clear to see that there is at least some merit in the argument that the two methods can be successfully combined to offer rounded consumer research [17].

Positivistic Approach Analysis Based on Szmigin and Foxall's Research

It seems, from considering both the research as conducted by Szmigin and Foxall and other related research in the area, that it is generally thought that interpretative research methods have been developed to fill in the gaps of the positivistic approach. In order to explore this theory fully, the perceived weaknesses of the positivistic approach from the perspective of Szmigin and Foxall requires further consideration, as this will give a clear indication of the anticipated role of interpretative research methods. By establishing the weaknesses of the positivistic approach, it will then be possible to ascertain whether the use of interpretative research would indeed fill this gap and should, therefore, be considered as a means of offering a more complete consumer behaviour analysis [18].

Szmigin and Foxall saw that there were several inherent weaknesses in the positivistic approach. Firstly, it was identified that the underlying assumption

that there is one reality that does not change; this is clearly unrealistic with consumers in a constant state of flux with ever changing external and internal decision factors. True positivism also works on the assumption that all consumers will make purchasing decision based on entirely reasoned factors with absolutely no input from irrational desires and impulse purchases. This is an over-simplistic view of the way in which consumers actually make decisions. It is well recognised that consumers will often make purchasing decision based on entirely irrational desires and, therefore, certain data patterns will be entirely meaningless, if only rational decision factors are considered.

Szmigin and Foxall also recognised that in taking this concept of a single reality as encouraged by the positivistic approach, there is a danger that all other possible realities are excluded, thus potentially missing out other possibly valuable data sets.

These main weaknesses in the positivistic approach are argued by Szmigin and Foxall to be the reason that interpretative research methods are necessary in order to fill in these gaps. These weaknesses are so substantial that it is accepted by Szmigin and Foxall that a positivistic approach is so fundamentally flawed that it alone cannot produce any meaningful data for the eventual users, namely the marketing manager in the relevant organisation.

A Wider Look at the Positivistic Approach

The positivistic or quantitative approach to consumer research is regarded as the traditional approach to consumer research; therefore, there is

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considerably more research available on the potential weaknesses to this area of research. Martin Callingham ^[19] stated that the main weakness in the use of qualitative approach is that, although input factors can be analysed against the actual outcome, there is no way, through using this direct data to ascertain whether the input factor was the actual cause of the witnessed outcome ^[20]. For example, if a company runs an advertising campaign and sees sales increase, the positivistic approach will show the statistical increase in sales, but will not show that it was the advertising campaign that drove this increase. The rise in sales will not necessarily be down to the advertising campaign; it could be down to a range of other cultural or social factors ^[21]. This failure to link cause and effect is the cited reason for the need to enhance the traditional positivistic approach ^[22].

Quantitative research is entirely science based with the emphasis on objectivity reliability and generalisations. Whilst this is clearly desirable in the field of research, consumer behaviour simply does not fall neatly within this scientific approach. There is positive value to be had in this approach, particularly when the aim of the research is to link directly some factor with base line results; it is both unbiased and objective with no values being derived from the researcher themselves. Despite this, the positivistic approach is clearly limited. Any variable that is not part of the model is totally disregarded and, as such, it is limited in its findings to the variables that are laid out in the original model ^[23]. Any fluidity of consumer behaviour will not be captured, which is an essential part of any consumer research project. It is this weakness that the use of interpretative research

aims to manage and deal with by adding value to the overall research project [24] .

Summary of Findings

The need to expand upon the traditional positivistic approach has been clearly recognised by Szmigin and Foxall. The paper recognises that there are inherent weaknesses in both approaches to consumer research which render the use of one research method to the exclusion of the other, ineffective [25] . However the paper has been slightly unsatisfactory in the way in which it reaches this conclusion. The approach taken by Szmigin and Foxall involved the consideration of the weakness of both methods and, having concluded that both methods have fundamental flaws, it was then decided that the only possible solution was to use a combination of the two. This conclusion is agreed with; however, a slightly more positive approach to reaching this conclusion would have been welcome [26] .

Other research papers have taken a more pragmatic approach by considering the difficulties and weaknesses with the traditional approach and then looking positively at whether or not the interpretative approach can suitably fill the gaps in a way that would improve the nature of the consumer research [27] .

The weaknesses in the traditional approach of failing to consider discarded variables and of failing to link the cause and effect of behaviour have been duly noted by Szmigin and Foxall. Where the analysis falls down is that they do not then go on to consider fully how the interpretative approach could

deal with these issues. It would seem, therefore, that by pulling together all of the relevant research in this area using an interpretative approach predominately yet with at least the basic controls such as those suggested by the positivistic approach, the best of both worlds will be achieved and the most comprehensive consumer research can be undertaken [28].

In summary, therefore, Szmigin and Foxall have reached the correct conclusion as to the importance of combining the two approaches, but the way in which this conclusion was reached could have been achieved in a more positive fashion rather than it being a default position which is what appears to have been the case with Szmigin and Foxall.

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