Emerging trends in qualitative research.
A focus on Social Media

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Abstract

Qualitative research has undergone transformative changes. Traditionally, qualitative data was gained through interviews, focus groups or documents in what was widely considered to be an expensive and time consuming process. Thanks to the evolution of technology – and the emergence of social media and mobile in particular – the qualitative research is fundamentally changing. In this Special Issue, we will explore the evolving and changing environment in the qualitative research domain from three different aspects: *data sources, data collection and data analysis*. We will also investigate hurdles and challenges related to the development of the discipline. In particular, we question about the ethical behaviour in the data collection and analysis and we will also provide implications from a research, teaching and managerial point of view.

Keywords: qualitative research, qualitative methods, unstructured data, social media.

Introduction

More than ever, qualitative research is going through a period of rapid change and confronting new challenges. Anyone interested in the current state and development of qualitative data analysis will find a field which is constantly expanding and, at the same time, growing less structured.

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This is due to the fact that data growth rate is accelerating rapidly. Most of the data being produced today is in the form of unstructured text, video, audio and graphics (Balducci and Marinova, 2018).

Social media content, online reviews, blog posts, text messages, emails, chat-bot conversations are just few examples of the amount of data every day we are facing and we are producing as consumers and users.

As Humphreys and Wang (2018) point out, "researchers, consumers, and marketers swim in a sea of language, and more and more of that language is recorded in the form of text" (p. 1).

From a research point view, this bulk of data represents a "Pandora's box" which some years ago was quite impossible to have and it gives rise to new opportunities as well as to new hurdles from a methodological and conceptual point of view.

In this editorial, which introduces the six papers included in this Special Issue, we will explore the evolving and changing environment in the qualitative research domain from three different aspects: *data sources, data collection and data analysis*.

Data sources

Before the advent of Internet and Web 2.0, research was based on traditional sources of data such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, transcripts, official documents and observation protocols.

These sources are now complemented by visual, video, virtual, textual, geographic and other types of data deriving in particular from social media (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). As suggested by Balducci and Marinova (2018), an estimated 80% of data held by firms today are unstructured data defined as "single data unit in which the information offers a relatively concurrent representation of its multifaceted nature without predefined organization or numeric values" (p. 560). This amount of data, together with traditional media, news stories, online word of mouth, and firm communications create the so-called "echoverse" (Hewett *et al.*, 2016) which firms should carefully manage in order to get the desired business outcomes.

In the literature we can find an increasing interest towards unstructured data.

Regarding social media, for instance, researchers have investigated the usage of Twitter from companies' point of view (Castellò *et al.*, 2016; Etter, 2014; Sundstrom *et al.*, 2017; Taecharungroj, 2017; Tao and Wilson, 2015) as well as from a consumer point of view (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2015; Kim and Song, 2016). These studies have generated valuable

insights into how businesses can use Twitter to engage, communicate and encourage behaviour in consumers. Also Facebook has been investigated by scholars in a bid to understand which type of content is more appreciated by users in terms of likes and number of comments. For instance, De Vries *et al*. (2012) highlight that vivid (i.e. the extent to which a brand post stimulates the different senses) and interactive (i.e. posing a question) brand post characteristics enhance the number of likes.

From a linguistic point of view, Barcelos *et al*. (2018) investigate how the tone of voice used by firms online (human vs. corporate) influences purchase intentions and findings suggest that a human tone of voice is not always the firm's best option. Cruz *et al*. (2017) provide marketers with needed guidance for creating effective online brand messaging by focusing in particular into how the inclusion of second person pronouns in online brand messaging affects relevant consumer outcomes. Moreover, more recently, scholars have started to deal with the actual impact of social media on sales (e.g. Colicev *et al*., 2018; Kumar *et al*., 2016; De Vries *et al*., 2017).

Online reviews represent another interesting line of research which deserves attention from scholars, given that many consumers base their purchase decision on online reviews (Van Laer *et al*., 2018; Zhao *et al*., 2018; Zhu and Zhang, 2010). Text-based analysis of consumer reviews has indeed attracted considerable attention in the recent marketing literature (e.g. Berger and Milkman, 2012; Van Laer *et al*., 2018; Ludwig *et al*., 2013; Ordenes *et al*., 2017).

Nevertheless, the analysis of non-textual data such as images and videos is still in its infancy. This is unfortunate because most of the communication provided by companies and brands is based on this kind of data and there is a need to better investigate them. Let us just think about the increasing usage of Instagram and in particular Instagram Stories which provides a bulk of data both from a business point of view as well as consumer point view.

Data collection

The large amount of data created by companies and users even if it represents an opportunity for marketers and for researchers, it gives rise to the need of new types of data collection.

As a consequence, new data collection tools, web crawling and data mining techniques have emerged in recent years.

One of the most common ways to access data stored online or on digital platforms is to query dedicated APIs (application programming interfaces),

"an interface provided by an application that lets users interact with or respond to data or service requests from another programme, other applications, or web sites" (Murugesan, 2007, p. 36). Every online platform has one API that allow users to access data, even with some limitations. Moreover, qualitative software programs have been integrated with tools to capture material for the web for qualitative analysis. For instance, the well-known software Nvivo, thanks to the web browser extension Ncapture, helps to quickly and easily capture content like web pages, online PDFs and social media for analysis.

Data analysis

Regarding data analysis, mixed or multi-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative techniques are growing in importance (Creswell and Clark, 2017). In particular, mixed methods research approaches – 'in which the researcher gathers both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems' (Creswell, 2014, p. 2) – have clear potential value in a digital research context. Qualitative data are often useful for triangulating and augmenting quantitative results, and in a social media context, they can go beyond tracking follower counts or hashtag use to create a more complete picture of a specific community.

For instance, Kozinets (2010, 2015) presented the concept of 'netnography' as a new approach that combines archival and online communication work, participation and observation with new forms of digital and network data collection and analysis.

Given the overwhelming amount of data deriving from online platforms, attention is increasingly turning towards automated content analysis instead of pure qualitative content analysis (e.g., employing human coders to manually code textual data), because it permits large-scale analyses and enhances the reliability, replicability, transparency and efficiency of the results (Humphreys, 2010; Morris, 1994).

Automated content analysis is one of the emerging trends in qualitative research (Humphreys and Wang, 2018 on JCR represents a milestone in our discipline). As suggested by Humphreys and Wang (2018), automated text analysis can be performed by using a top-down approach with standardised dictionaries or by using a botton-up approach creating a custom dictionary. Two of the most used popular text analysis softwares are LIWC2015 (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) and WordStat. Both read a given text and count the percentage of words included in the dictionaries used for the analysis.

In particular, LIWC2015 relies on underlying psychological scales that reflect different emotions, thinking styles, social concerns, and even parts of speech (Pennebaker *et al.*, 2007). LIWC2015 has been already used by several scholars in different academic fields ranging from psychology (e.g. Bazarova *et al.*, 2012; Boyd and Pennebaker, 2017) to marketing (e.g. Cruz *et al.*, 2017; Hewett *et al.*, 2016) and consumer behaviour (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014; Humphreys and Wang, 2018). LIWC has been used for instance to investigate the linguistic features of posts and their impact on engagement or to investigate semantic content and style properties of customer reviews to examine their influence on online retail sites' conversion rates.

However, it is worth noting that, as Cornelissen (2016) claims, the hallmark of qualitative research is under pressure because "qualitative papers are increasingly being fashioned in the image of quantitative research, so much so that papers adopt 'factor-analytic' styles of theorizing that have typically been the preserve of quantitative methods" (p. 1).

As researchers, we should therefore pay attention towards this trade-off between qualitative and quantitative analysis when we are dealing with unstructured data.

Implications for researchers and managers

One of the main issues regarding the collection and the analysis of unstructured data is related to an ethical dilemma: given that most of the data are free to download or easily accessible, is it ethical to download data without asking permission to the authors? Are social media really public spaces?

As you might know, we have also recently seen the debate about GDPR and privacy issues online and we are not going to delve deeper on this.

Researchers have started to deal with this topic and there are also some ethical guidelines surrounding the collection and analysis of social media data (Society, 2013; Townsend and Wallace, 2016) as well as some examples in the literature (Glozer and Caruana, 2018; Kozinets, 2015; Pritchard and Whiting, 2014).

As suggested by Kozinets (2015), "the fact that people know that their posting are public does not automatically lead to the conclusion that they are also grant automatic unspoken consent for academics and other types of scholarly researchers to use this data in any way that they please" (p. 137). In particular, when we are dealing with posts published by users and not by companies, which actually have an open page and post content online in order to promote themselves, it should be wiser to ask for permission before using those data for research purposes. In particular, in

the qualitative research, excerpts or sentences are important to provide evidence about the topic discussed. For publication purposes, it is therefore suggested to use pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity and to "cloak" data in order to remove direct reference to a specific information.

The rise of unstructured data has some consequences for teaching purposes as well. From a teaching point of view, a strong connection between researchers and practitioners is needed. Scholars can provide the theoretical assumption behind online media and to provide a solid background related to the marketing discipline in terms of management of these new platforms, measuring and analysing results. On the other hand, digital marketing managers enrolled inside companies or as freelances can provide a real snapshot about the most recent technologies, updates and tools used by companies in order to communicate with stakeholders.

From a managerial point of view, we can see also an increasing demand for experts as big data scientists and computer science. Firms are indeed currently analysing 12% of their available data (Balducci and Marinova, 2018). In recent years, indeed, we are seeing an evolving trend in the marketing discipline which is going towards a hybridization with IT. This poses questions regarding how the role of the marketing manager is changing.

Papers in this Special Issue

For this Special Issue we have received many contributions and this denotes the attention of scholars towards the topic. We have selected six papers which provide useful updates and insights about new emerging qualitative methodologies applied in the social media context both from a theoretical and methodological point of view.

The paper *The Other "Meta" of Meta-Analysis: Qualitative and Text-Based Approaches to "Analysis of Analysis" in Marketing* written by Ksenia Silchenko opens this Special Issue by discussing what kind of contributions interpretative qualitative methodologies can bring to the familiar literature reviews and suggests that a stronger focus on text-based and discourse analysis approaches (Fitchett and Caruana, 2015) to the analysis of marketing texts can enrich marketing research both in terms of methodologies and new knowledge generation.

Three papers focus in particular on new methodologies to analyse social media data and they provide an interesting contribution to the field.

Francesca Negri with the paper *A (Social Media) picture is worth a thousand words* poses the attention on the usage of pictures on social media which represent a growing stream of literature. Images and videos are even more used by companies and users on social media because they create more attention and because they are also preferred by the algorithms

behind the platforms. However, analysing images and videos is not an easy task for a researcher because there are a lot of issues to take care of. The paper tries to transfer Content Analysis method from text to visual content (images and pictures), focusing on UGCs one. The paper contributes to the existing literature by providing a review of innovative collecting methods and by modelling a specific new protocol to analyse UGC photos, images and pictures deriving from social media.

Ludovica Moi, Moreno Frau e Francesca Cabiddu with the paper *Exploring the Role of NVivo Software in Marketing Research* performs an exploratory single case study focusing on the Facebook page of a mobile phone industry firm. They explored, using the NVivo software, customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions in the area of consumer brand engagement within an online setting.

Ilenia Confente and Stefano Russo in the paper *Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA): A useful methodological tool for research in the social sciences. An example from the online word-of-mouth context* applied the QCA method to the context of the word-of-mouth (WOM) generation processes. The purpose of the paper is to investigate the behaviour of Generation Y in the online context, particularly regarding the activity of WOM about travel/hotels and hospitality experiences.

The paper by Rossella Gambetti and Silvia Biraghi *How to use digital diaries in data collection to engage networked consumers* provides new insights about how diaries, in the form of digitally constructed artifacts using smart and mobile technologies, can be adopted to complement research projects conducted in networked settings. Authors frame the methodological contributions by building on the concept of networked sociality, an emerging form of people connectivity that is the result of the intertwinement of digital media and their related communicative modes.

A particular focus on influencers, which represent an emerging and interesting topic in the social media landscape, concludes this Special Issue. Given that influencers are growing, for companies it is not easy to identify and select the right influencers for their brand. The paper by Roberta De Michele and Gianluca Marchi *Influencer identification and selection on social networking sites: An analysis on Instagram* seeks to unpack this issue by exploring how various influencers act on Instagram and proposing different approaches for identifying and selecting influencers. It further discusses the relationships between different types of influencers, influencers' selection variables and firms' brand strategy before concluding with insights for practitioners.

We hope that you will enjoy this Special Issue and that it will give you new insights for your future research.

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