

## What makes a good case study? A positivist review of qualitative case research published in *Industrial Marketing Management*, 1971–2006

Michael Beverland<sup>a,\*</sup>, Adam Lindgreen<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Management, University of Bath, BA2 7AY, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Hull University Business School & IESEG School of Management, Department of Marketing and Business, Strategy, Hull, HU6 7RX, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

Business-to-business marketing research has a long tradition of using qualitative case studies. *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM) has actively encouraged the use of case methods, resulting in many important theoretical advances in the field. However, debate still rages over what constitutes “good case research”. This article addresses this issue from a positivist standpoint. We examine the how authors address issues of quality in the 105 qualitative case studies published in IMM between 1971 and 2006. Four periods were identified: 1971–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, and 2000–2006. Findings demonstrate that, from a positivist viewpoint, there has been a steady improvement in how authors addressed issues of research quality in published qualitative case studies. Suggestions for changes in data presentation, reviewer expectations, the IMM reviewer feedback form, and the use of web-based appendices containing data pertinent to reader judgments of research quality are suggested.

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### 1. Introduction

Industrial marketing research is characterized by the use of qualitative case studies to build theory<sup>2</sup> (Dubois & Araujo, 2004, 2007; Easton, 2000; Harrison & Easton, 2004). The value of case studies to business marketing theory is recognized in editorial missions of all three-specialist business-to-business (B2B) marketing journals (IMM, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, and *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*). Researchers have employed case studies partly because the inherent flexibility of the method suits the study of the complex, evolving relationships and interactions in industrial markets (Dubois & Araujo, 2004).

However, the nature of case quality and its associated practices varies widely (Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Easton, 2000; Harrison & Easton, 2004). Several authors have noted the need for greater sensitivity to quality criteria in business marketing case research to avoid inappropriate practices (Hillebrand, Kok, & Biemans, 2001), including the preferencing of one type of design (multiple cases) over rich, single cases (Dubois & Araujo, 2007). As well, others, desiring greater pluralism in method, have

called for greater sensitivity to the epistemological issues underpinning quality criteria in qualitative case research (Easton, 2000; Harrison & Easton, 2004). We respond to these calls (and that of the special issue) by conducting a longitudinal examination of how authors have addressed research quality in *Industrial Marketing Management*. Besides space considerations, we chose IMM because the journal is recognized as the leading journal in industrial marketing and is a top ten journal by influence within marketing over a thirty-year period (Baumgartner & Pieters, 2003). As such, IMM was judged to provide preeminent examples of case research within the sub-discipline of B2B marketing. We focus on qualitative case studies published between 1971 and 2006. Although sensitive to other traditions such as realism (Easton, 2000), interpretivism (Beverland, 2005) and postmodernism (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006), we focus on case quality from the dominant positivist viewpoint—a summary of case quality criteria from this standpoint is presented in Table 1.

We believe that addressing research quality is important for qualitative case researchers for at least six reasons. First, attention to quality is likely to lead to better practices in the field (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Second, being sensitive to how quality is addressed may result in richer insights and therefore better theory. Third, active debate over research quality is a sign of a healthy research community, and thus will improve the status of the method (Silverman, 2004a). Fourth, having explicit standards of quality will improve the legitimacy of case research, thus improving the status of the B2B field, and potentially increasing the impact of case research. Fifth, such debates can alleviate concerns raised by other researchers over the value of qualitative research (including cases) in marketing (Levy, 2005). Finally, having clear guidelines on how case quality can be addressed is essential for B2B doctoral candidates.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: M.Beverland@Bath.ac.uk (M. Beverland), a.lindgreen@hull.ac.uk (A. Lindgreen).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +44 652 437 933.

<sup>2</sup> For readability we will simply use the terms “case studies” or “cases” to refer to qualitative case studies, unless otherwise indicated in text. Although case studies can be wholly or partially quantitative, we limit our focus to published articles that focus on the reporting of non-numerical qualitative data. Those cases (such as single industry studies) using quantitative data address quality through standard tests for reliability and validity.

**Table 1**  
Positivist quality criteria for case research.

Design test	Theoretical explanation of the concept	Operationalized through
Construct validity	To secure that correct operational measures have been established for the concepts that are being studied (Yin, 1994).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Triangulation through multiple sources of data or interviews.</li> <li>2. Providing readers with a chain of evidence using cross-case tables or quotes from informants.</li> <li>3. Allowing interviewees to review the draft case and give feedback.</li> </ol>
Internal validity	To make sure that a causal relationship—certain conditions lead to other conditions—has been established. Internal validity is a concern of explanatory or causal case studies but not for exploratory or descriptive cases that do not attempt to make causal statements (Yin, 1994)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pattern matching through cross-case analysis.</li> <li>2. Searching for negative cases, ruling out or accounting for alternative explanations.</li> <li>3. Time series analysis</li> </ol>
External validity	To prove that the domain to which a case study's findings belong can be generalized (Yin, 1994)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Specification of the population of interest.</li> <li>2. Replication logic in multiple case studies.</li> </ol>
Reliability	Demonstrating that the findings from a case study can be replicated if the case study procedures are followed (Yin, 1994)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A standardized interview protocol.</li> <li>2. Constructs well defined and grounded in extant literature.</li> <li>3. Providing an audit-trail by providing access to data.</li> </ol>

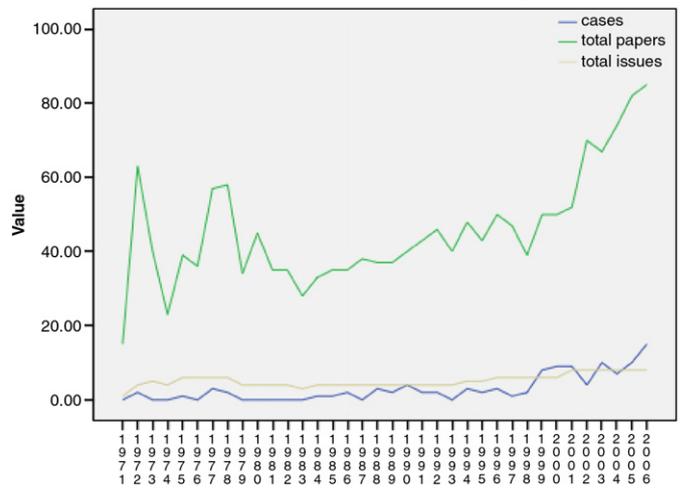
Adapted from Beverland & Lockshin (2003, p.656) and Flint, Woodruff and Gardial (2002, p. 106).

**2. Method**

For the purposes of this article we define case studies as “an exploration of a “bounded system” [bounded by time and place] or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998 p. 61). Cases were identified in a number of ways. First, we conducted a keyword search (looking for the terms “case study” or “qualitative”). A typical example of this was “Its practical application is demonstrated through a case study in industrial engineering and construction” (Mühlbacher, Dreher, & Gabriel-Ritter, 1994, p. 287). Second, we read each article carefully in order to assess if the qualitative articles met the definition provided above and to see that case studies were in fact based primarily on qualitative data (we removed articles that were theoretical discussions of the case method (n = 3), purely quantitative cases (n = 16) and one case study that had been printed twice). Third, we read through each issue of IMM published between 1971 and 2006 to identify any case studies we may have missed. The final population consisted of 105 qualitative case studies.<sup>3</sup> Trends in case publication vs. total number of articles and issues during the period 1971–2006 are covered in Fig. 1.

The analysis occurred in three phases. First, we analyzed explicit considerations of case quality (where available) in each article against positivist criteria. Second, given that relatively few researchers explicitly addressed research quality, we analyzed each case for evidence of quality-related practices. This process was done by both authors and involved two stages—within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). The first stage involved a careful reading of each individual article (within-case analysis). Following this both

<sup>3</sup> Although we report on many of these cases directly, space considerations preclude from providing a full list. However, we are happy to provide this database should others desire it.



**Fig. 1.** Cases and total papers published in IMM, 1971–2006.

authors wrote memos on each article, identifying key issues and practices (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Cross-case analysis involved looking for patterns across time. We used four time-periods to guide our analysis: 1971–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, and 2000–2006<sup>4</sup> (feedback on our interpretation was gained via departmental seminars, the guest editors and the two anonymous reviewers of this paper). These periods primarily revolve around the publication of seminal texts on qualitative research, while the first period (1971–1979) represented the founding years of the journal and an era when business researchers had few resources to guide them on qualitative research quality (even classics such as Glaser and Strauss (1967) provide little explicit guidance on quality). The second period coincided with the publication of a special issue on qualitative methodology in *Administrative Science Quarterly* (see Van Maanen, 1983 for review), which included several articles addressing case quality. As well, Yin and Miles and Huberman published their books on case studies in 1984. Other influential works including Sage's *Qualitative Research Series* (e.g., Kirk & Miller, 1986; McCracken, 1988), Bonoma (1985), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1983) (among others) were also published during this period. Each of these provided expert guidance on conducting qualitative case research. As well, the so-called “epistemology wars” in marketing occurred during this period (Levy, 2005).

The third period coincided with the publication of three seminal articles on case research between 1989 and 1991 (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991), two editions of Strauss and Corbin's sourcebook on qualitative research, Spiggle's article on data analysis (1994), revised versions of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), Yin (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1994), and an increased acceptance of qualitative research in major marketing journals. The final period reflects several things—the diffusion of the aforementioned two decades of published work on conducting qualitative case research and addressing research quality, the widespread acceptance of qualitative research in marketing, and subsequent increase in trained doctoral candidates using qualitative methods.

**3. Findings**

It is important to bear several issues in mind when reading the findings section. Since our task involves critically analyzing others'

<sup>4</sup> We recognize that the boundaries of these periods are “fuzzy” given the time for adoption and diffusion to occur and delays arising from the review process and publication schedules.

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