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Using marketing research in quality of life theory and practice

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Abstract

Quality of life can be defined both from an objective approach (using macroeconomic indicators) and from a subjective one (referring to the individual's level of satisfaction), therefore the methods of research needed in both cases are very diversified. The paper starts with the presentation of the marketing research methods from the theoretical point of view, emphasizing their special features for the quality of life (QoL) research. The second part of the paper focuses on the practical perspective of QoL analysis, classifying the studies in three categories: marketing researches totally dedicated to QoL study, marketing researches that address a much wider socio-economic topic (QoL included), and QoL studies that combine the results of marketing studies with macroeconomic statistical data.

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1. Introduction in Quality of Life Studies

Considering the present global concerns for sustainable development within the domestic and foreign policies, the study of the quality of life concept comes as a basic requirement in order to better understand the particular context of the market and then implement a coherent strategy of QoL improvement.

Quality of Life can be defined as the subjective perception of an individual on the objective conditions of life and well-being. This definition highlights the two approaches in QoL theory: objective and subjective. Trying to combine the two approaches, R. Costanza (2008) defines quality of life as “the extent to which objective human needs are fulfilled in relation to personal or group perceptions of subjective well-being”. While objective needs refer to subsistence, reproduction, security, affection, etc., subjective perception aims at happiness, life satisfaction and personal usefulness.

Whether we study quality of life as a whole or we focus on one of its dimension/approaches, the practice showed us that there is an acute need for a systematic research process, thus the need for marketing research, with all its methods, techniques and instruments, which gives a higher level of accuracy and relevance to the data collected.

2. Theoretic Point of View for the Marketing Research Methods Used in Quality of Life Studies

In quality of life studies we used both qualitative and quantitative methods of marketing research, but the predominance is for the second category, due to the need for quantifiable information, that will later be compared

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with the results of other studies in order to identify the level of development for this phenomenon in time. The most frequent quantitative methods used in quality of life studies are survey and observation, while the qualitative researches most used are focus-group and in-depth interview.

Both from the theoretical and practical perspective, the most frequent used marketing research method is the survey, which involves collecting data about individuals through interviews. This method allows a wide variety of data collection from a large number of persons, so that the data gathered are representative, accurate and relevant.

To meet the three conditions mentioned above, the most important step within the survey is the construction of the questionnaire, the instrument for data collection. It is said that a research cannot be better than its questionnaire (Moser, 1967), theory and practice proving this statement true by the multitude of problems that a researcher may face as long as he is not developing a coherent process of the questionnaire design, problem such as lack of representativeness of the collected data, different answers due to the different interpretation for the same question, lack of exhaustiveness in the answers provided in the questionnaire, etc.

The most important studies about the subjective approach for quality of life are based on surveys, of which are worth mentioning the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), Mercer Quality of Living Survey, Perception Survey on Quality of Life in European Cities (conducted at the request of the European Commission), Eurobarometer, European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), European Social Survey (ESS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), World Value Survey (WVS), The Stiglitz Report and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality-of-Life Index.

However, researchers that use the survey are usually facing two major problems: the lack of interest to participate in the research and the uncertainty regarding the truthfulness of the data provided by respondents.

These two disadvantages of the survey may be eliminated by means of observation, where the information collected reflects the actual behavior of individuals, precisely because, most of the times, they are not aware they are being observed, so they cannot manipulate the information provided to the researcher. Because of the concealment of the research based on observation, there have been a series of problems that appeared with regards to the ethical issues of carrying out such research. The solution is that these studies are confidential; the participants are not in any way connected to the information collected.

In terms of quality of life studies, observation is founded mainly in medical studies regarding the state of health and welfare of patients, without disturbing them with further questions. Observation can be either mechanical (using various medical instruments recording the patient's vital signs), or personal (by observations made by the persons around the patient).

Focus-group research involves relatively long and detailed discussions with a group of 8-12 people about a phenomenon, without having a structured interview. Instead, the researcher is proposing topics for discussion on which the participants would state their point of view, guiding them carefully towards the needed information.

Although most of the marketing research for quality of life is based on surveys, there are still a series of studies whose data are collected using qualitative research, particularly through focus-groups. But such studies are usually aimed at a much narrow area of quality of life and are addressing a certain category of the public (such as patients or former patients, the elderly, people with disability, etc.) or relate to a particular theme (the influence of a certain disease on the quality of life, the evolution of quality of life after illness recovery, the meaning of the quality of life for the individual, etc.). An example in this respect is the article "The use of focus groups in evaluating quality of life components among elderly Chinese people" (Leung et al., 2004), which assesses the quality of life among the elderly population in China, through group discussions with 44 people. As it can be seen above, usually focus-group researches have a much lower incidence rate compared with surveys, thus their result cannot be extrapolated globally.

The in-depth interview involves discussing with a sole participant and is recommended when the group discussion cannot be organized, either because of the scope of the research (in the case of research with experts, taking into consideration data confidentiality; or for researches on intimate or taboo topics), or because the type of participants is requesting such a research method (taking into account that not everyone expresses freely their opinion in front of strangers). The focus group features are found also in the in-depth interview, thus the data collected using this method cannot be extrapolated for the entire community, but may offer a detailed picture of the

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