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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FOR A DIGITAL WORLD

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To my husband, Amit, and my son, Goransh, for providing unwavering help and support at every moment, believing in my work, and enabling the processes for the desired outcome; mentors, especially Prof. Jag Sheth, for continuously extending me beyond the status quo and evoking the idea to give back to the community while creating new knowledge, Prof. Russ Belk, who is a terrific co-author and renowned global qualitative scholar, consistently inspiring and motivating; the MICA community, who always embrace me with their kindness and generosity, especially doctoral scholars who constantly inspired me to write this book while I was teaching them for more than a decade. Knowledge is always co-created with different communities and people.

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To the Almighty, my husband Himanshu Bhatt, my parents, who never stopped believing in me, and my mentors who planted the seed of knowledge in my mind and guided me.

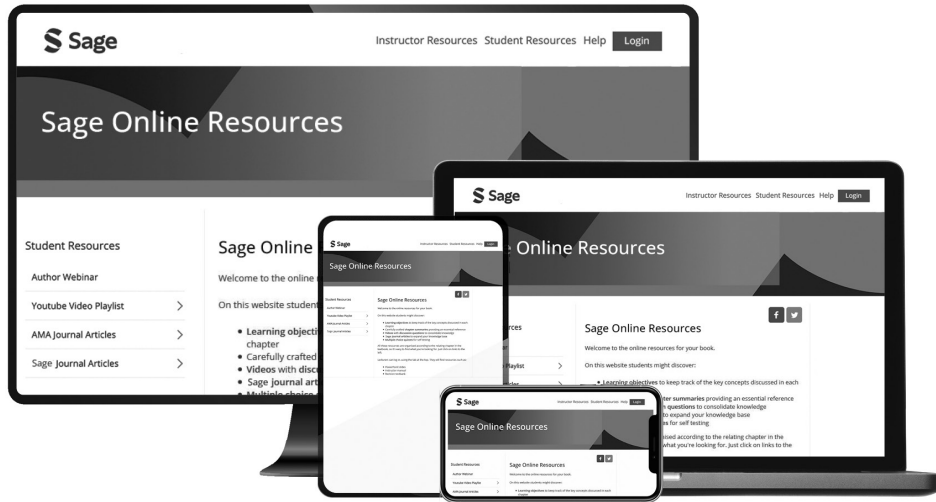
Himani



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ONLINE RESOURCES



Qualitative Research for a Digital World is supported by a wealth of online resources to aid study and support teaching, which are available at <https://study.sagepub.com/mogaji>

FOR LECTURERS

PowerPoint slides can be downloaded and customised for use in your own presentations, outlining the key learning objectives covered in each chapter.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Emmanuel Mogaji is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Keele Business School. His focus is on Marketing's ABCDE: Advertising, Branding, Communication, Digital, and Ethics. With numerous peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, and awards, including the Emerald Literati Award for financial services marketing research, he's a recognized authority. Mogaji has authored textbooks on *Brand Management* (Palgrave) and *Introduction to Advertising and Digital Consumer Management* (Routledge), and has co-edited 12 books on higher education, green, and fashion marketing.

Varsha Jain is the AGK Chair Professor of Marketing and Co-Chairperson of Research and Dissertation at the MICA, India. She is the Deputy Editor of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (JCB, 'A' journal) and an associate editor (AE) at three 'A' journals: *Psychology and Marketing*, the *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, and the *Australasian Marketing Journal*. She received the best AE award from JCB in 2022, is an editorial board member at the *International Journal of Information Management* ('A*' journal) and the *Journal of Business Research* ('A' journal, social media track), and was Co-Track Chairperson at the Advertising Academy of Marketing Science, USA annual conference, 2023; and Co-Chairperson, special session, American Marketing Association (AMA) Winter Conference, 2024. She is the Vice Chair of International Relations, Higher Education, Special Interest Group, and the AMA, USA. She has authored over 145 publications (primarily qualitative research in the digital age), including multiple papers in 'A*' and 'A' journals, including the *European Journal of Marketing*, the *International Journal of Information Management*, the *Journal of Advertising Research*, the *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, the *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, and the *Journal of Business Research*. She has received over 26 international and national awards and gold medals in scholarship. The most recent is the 2024 Best Paper award for her special session held at the Winter AMA 2024 Annual Conference, USA; in 2023 she received the Best Methodology Paper Award at Newcastle University along with Lancaster University Management School and Brunel University at the Marketing, Strategy, and Policy Conference, UK; and the Best Paper (Runner-up) award for our special session held at the Winter AMA 2023 Annual Conference, USA. In her global research career, she is a visiting guest at Emory Business School, Atlanta, USA, and a visiting scholar at University of Greenwich, London, and The Medill School, Northwestern University, USA. Her interest areas are advertising, branding, consumer behaviour, and digital, primarily immersive, technologies,

including artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality, virtual reality, and the metaverse. She was also co-editor for seven special issues related to AI, social media influencers, and the metaverse for JCB in the 'A' journals in 2024 and 2025. She has co-authored and co-edited books, primarily with Prof. Jag Sheth, *Consumer Behavior, AI and Services*, *Customer Services in Digital Context*, and *The Future of Purpose-Driven Branding* with Prof. David Aaker. With these global legends, she is working on seven more books related to AI and marketing, global digital consumer behaviour, customer relationship marketing in the digital context, with Aaker in branding; sub-categories of brands; and with other international scholars on qualitative research in the digital world and brand India. Her publications are centred around qualitative research, and she has also been teaching this methodology to various students in India and outside for more than a decade.

Himani Sharma is a doctoral student at MICA, India. She is a visiting scholar in the Department of Media, Society, and Communication at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. She has co-authored three research papers and four book chapters as an early-career qualitative researcher. She specializes in qualitative research methodology and is trained to use different qualitative research methods online and offline.

INTRODUCTION

Opening Case Vignette

Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Mental Health

Simbi, a graduate student with disabilities who uses a wheelchair and identifies as transgender, has endured instances of cyberbullying on social media, adversely affecting their mental well-being. Despite these challenges, Simbi is determined to channel their personal experiences into meaningful research. Currently pursuing their master's dissertation, Simbi seeks to investigate the impact of social media on adolescent mental health.

Amidst the growing prevalence of social media in adolescents' lives, Simbi recognizes the need to delve deeper into how online interactions impact mental health outcomes among teenagers. Drawing from their own encounters with cyberbullying, Simbi aims to shed light on the nuanced dynamics at play within digital spaces and the implications for adolescent well-being.

Through their research, Simbi hopes to uncover insights into the ways in which social media usage patterns, online behaviours, and peer interactions contribute to adolescents' mental health struggles. By exploring the experiences of young individuals navigating social media platforms, Simbi seeks to generate knowledge that can inform interventions and support systems aimed at promoting positive mental health outcomes among adolescents in the digital age.

Simbi's journey exemplifies the intersection of personal experience, academic inquiry, and social impact, underscoring the importance of research that is grounded in lived realities and driven by a commitment to fostering positive change. As they embark on their dissertation journey, Simbi remains steadfast in their dedication to amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and advocating for inclusive and equitable digital spaces for all.

In their journey they unravel the complexities of conducting research in the digital landscape, focusing on the intersection of data availability, data collection, and analysis within the context of adolescent mental health. Considering this, let us ponder upon the questions below.

(Continued)

Reflective Questions for Consideration

- 1 How does the abundance of data available on social media platforms influence our understanding of adolescent mental health?
- 2 What ethical considerations must be taken into account when collecting and analysing data from digital sources, particularly concerning privacy and consent?
- 3 How can the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods enhance the depth and breadth of our research findings in the digital realm?

In today's digital age, the landscape of research has undergone a profound transformation. As researchers, it is crucial for us to navigate this digital context adeptly and understand its implications for our work. This is particularly relevant for qualitative researchers, who delve into the nuances of human experiences and behaviours. Thus, introducing researchers to qualitative research with a specific focus on the digital world becomes imperative.

This introduction immerses researchers in the intersection of traditional research methodologies with contemporary digital advancements. It acknowledges the evolving nature of research practices, where digital technologies have seamlessly integrated into every aspect of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Emphasizing the unique strengths in capturing the complexities of human experiences and behaviours, the introduction explores how qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations, can be adapted to the digital realm. This allows for remote data collection and analysis through online platforms and digital tools.

Moreover, researchers are guided to continually explore the implications of conducting qualitative research in the digital world, including considerations of data privacy, ethical considerations, and the role of technology in shaping research outcomes. They examine how digital technologies, such as social media platforms, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence, can both enhance and challenge qualitative research practices.

Throughout their learning journey, students engage with case studies and real-world examples that illustrate the application of qualitative research in digital contexts. They critically analyse the strengths and limitations of digital qualitative research methods, considering factors such as sample representativeness, data validity, and researcher reflexivity.

Ultimately, by introducing students to qualitative research in the digital world, educators empower them to navigate the complexities of contemporary research practices, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to conduct rigorous and ethically sound research in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

While recognizing the abundance of resources on qualitative research for a digital world, this book stands uniquely positioned at the intersection of all disciplines,

offering foundational insights for advancing qualitative research globally. Unlike other resources, it takes a deep dive into three interconnected strands: data availability, data collection, and data analysis, shaping the future of qualitative research for a digital world.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Understand how to recognize and identify digital data sources relevant to your research questions.
- Gain insight into the diverse methods available for digital data collection.
- Recognize the relevance of digital data and explore the potential of employing advanced analytical techniques.
- Navigate ethical considerations inherent in digital research practices.
- Apply foundational qualitative research principles effectively within the digital landscape.

NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL REALM: DATA AVAILABILITY, COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

Data availability: In this digital age, researchers have access to vast amounts of data generated on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Students can access publicly available posts, comments, and messages to understand how adolescents discuss mental health issues online. By analysing hashtags related to mental health, they can uncover prevalent themes, concerns, and coping strategies shared by young users. Additionally, researchers may explore academic literature, online forums, and digital archives to contextualize their findings within broader societal and cultural dynamics.

Data collection: To collect data for their study, researchers may employ a mix of qualitative methods tailored to the digital context. They could conduct online surveys or interviews with adolescents to gather first-hand accounts of their experiences with social media and mental health. Utilizing digital ethnography, researchers may immerse themselves in online communities dedicated to mental health awareness and observe interactions between members. Web-scraping techniques could also be employed to collect anonymized data from public social media profiles, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of user-generated content.

Data analysis: Once data is collected, researchers can employ various analytical approaches to uncover insights and patterns. Qualitative analysis software enables them to code and categorize textual data, identifying recurring themes and sentiments

related to mental health discussions. Students may also conduct sentiment analysis to quantify emotional expressions and attitudes expressed in social media posts. Furthermore, they could utilize machine learning algorithms to classify and analyse large datasets, identifying correlations between social media usage patterns and mental health outcomes among adolescents.

By immersing students in the exploration of these three strands within the context of a real-world research project, educators facilitate a comprehensive understanding of qualitative research in the digital world. Through hands-on experiences and critical engagement with digital tools and methodologies, students develop the skills and expertise needed to conduct rigorous and impactful research in today's data-rich and technology-driven society.

At the intersection of data availability, data collection, and data analysis lies the synergy of digital research methodologies, where researchers harness the abundance of available data, employ innovative collection techniques, and utilize advanced analytical tools to derive insights and generate knowledge.

Here, researchers navigate through a cyclical process, starting with identifying available sources of data relevant to their research questions. They then employ diverse data collection methods, tailored to the digital landscape, to gather information from various online platforms, databases, and sources. This could include scraping data from websites, conducting online surveys, or extracting insights from social media interactions.

Once data is collected, researchers engage in thorough analysis, utilizing qualitative analysis software, statistical techniques, and machine learning algorithms to explore patterns, trends, and relationships within the dataset. This involves coding qualitative data, quantifying sentiments, identifying correlations, and deriving meaningful insights from the collected information.

The intersection represents a dynamic space where researchers harness the full potential of digital technologies to conduct comprehensive and rigorous research. It emphasizes the iterative nature of the research process, where data availability informs data collection strategies, and the outcomes of data analysis guide further inquiry and exploration. Ultimately, it is at this intersection that researchers generate new knowledge, contribute to scholarly discourse, and drive positive societal impact in the digital age.

TRANSFORMING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE DIGITAL ERA

As we navigate the digital realm and acknowledge the pivotal role of data availability, collection, and analysis in shaping contemporary research practices, it becomes essential to grasp the fundamental distinctions between the traditional qualitative method and its evolution in the digital sphere. This understanding lays the foundation for our

exploration in this book, offering insights into diverse research methodologies and equipping researchers to thrive in the dynamic landscape of the digital world.

SCOPE OF DATA ACCESSIBILITY

Traditional qualitative research often relied on limited datasets gathered through interviews, observations, or focus groups. In contrast, the digital sphere has exponentially expanded the scope of data accessibility. Researchers now have access to vast amounts of digital data generated on various online platforms such as social media, forums, and digital archives. For example, instead of conducting individual interviews with participants, researchers can analyse user-generated content on social media platforms to gain insights into public opinions, behaviours, and sentiments.

Enhanced Data Collection Methods

Digital technologies have revolutionized data collection methods in qualitative research. While traditional methods such as face-to-face interviews and paper surveys remain prevalent, digital tools offer new avenues for data collection. Online surveys, digital diaries, virtual interviews, and digital ethnography allow researchers to reach a wider audience and collect data remotely. For instance, researchers studying online communities can use digital ethnography to observe interactions and behaviours within these groups without physical presence.

Advanced Data Analysis Techniques

The digital sphere has introduced advanced data analysis techniques that complement traditional qualitative analysis methods. Qualitative analysis software, sentiment analysis tools, and machine learning algorithms enable researchers to process and analyse large volumes of digital data efficiently. For example, sentiment analysis can be applied to social media data to quantify emotions and attitudes expressed in user-generated content, providing valuable insights into public perceptions and trends.

Real-Time Data Insights

Unlike traditional qualitative research, which often involved time-consuming data collection and analysis processes, the digital sphere offers real-time data insights. Researchers can monitor online conversations, trends, and events as they unfold, allowing for timely analysis and interpretation of data. For instance, social media listening tools enable researchers to track public discussions and reactions to current events or social issues, providing immediate insights into emerging topics and sentiments.

Ethical and Privacy Considerations

The digital sphere presents unique ethical and privacy considerations that differ from traditional qualitative research. Researchers must navigate issues such as data privacy, informed consent, and digital surveillance when collecting and analysing digital data. For example, researchers studying social media data must adhere to ethical guidelines to protect user privacy and ensure informed consent for data usage. Additionally, researchers must consider the potential biases and limitations associated with digital data sources, such as algorithmic biases or data inaccuracies.

THE TARGET

While numerous books delve into qualitative research methodologies, many focus on specific methodologies or disciplines such as business or sociology. This book, however, aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of qualitative research within the digital landscape. It is targeted primarily at postgraduate students, particularly those pursuing master's or PhD degrees, who seek to expand beyond traditional research methods and explore technology-driven approaches. Whether they are embarking on introductory research methodology courses or diving into advanced qualitative research modules, this book serves as a valuable resource.

Moreover, established researchers across various disciplines and academic backgrounds can benefit from this book. It offers a repository of diverse topics, making it an ideal starting point for gaining basic understanding and expanding research knowledge. Practitioners keen on exploring different methodologies from academia will find valuable insights here, especially in emerging digital data collection methods. For example, those investigating user experience using models like ALARA and employing techniques such as screencasting and digital diaries to understand consumer behaviour will find relevant guidance.

Industry professionals who utilize various qualitative research methods or collaborate with academics for projects will also find this book beneficial. It can aid in designing industry projects and management development programmes, enabling professionals to conduct cutting-edge qualitative research effectively. Additionally, consultants and individuals associated with research-oriented organizations like Ipsos, Ernst & Young, and PwC can leverage the book's insights to enhance their research practices.

The overarching goal is to provide a reference point for qualitative research in the digital context, catering to a diverse audience and encouraging high-quality research worldwide. Through a case-in-point approach, the book aims to empower readers with practical knowledge and skills to navigate the complexities of qualitative research in the digital age.

THE PEDAGOGICAL FEATURES

The pedagogical features incorporated into the book are meticulously designed to ensure global relevance and applicability in the ever-evolving landscape of qualitative research through digital mediums. Here's an expanded overview of these features:

- **Thorough Concept Elucidation:** The book delves into both current and emerging concepts associated with qualitative research in the digital environment. It offers a comprehensive exploration of these ideas, providing readers with a deep understanding of the subject matter.
- **Collaborative Development Process:** Each concept discussed in the book undergoes a rigorous development process involving authors, colleagues, peers, and feedback from students and faculty across various institutions. This collaborative effort ensures that the content is refined and aligned with the needs of diverse learners worldwide.
- **Opening and Closing Cases:** To enhance visibility and facilitate easy reference, each chapter begins and ends with opening and closing cases. These cases serve as real-world examples that contextualize the chapter content and engage readers from the outset.
- **Chapter Pretext, Introduction, and Objectives:** Each chapter is structured with an opening case vignette, introduction, and learning objectives. This allows readers to engage with the material and understand what to expect, setting a clear pathway for learning and comprehension.
- **Global Examples and Integration of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI):** The book incorporates relevant examples from different parts of the world, fostering inclusivity and diversity. By integrating examples that reflect diverse cultural perspectives, the book aims to promote EDI and decolonize the curriculum.
- **Frameworks and Graphical Illustrations:** Key points within each chapter are elucidated through the use of frameworks, graphical illustrations, and flow diagrams. These visual aids help readers grasp complex concepts more easily and reinforce understanding through visual representation.
- **Reading Resources and Web Links:** Each chapter includes curated reading resources and web links that are globally applicable and accessible across disciplines. This enables readers to further explore topics of interest and access additional learning materials to deepen their understanding.
- **Holistic Overview:** By presenting a holistic overview of research ideas, cases, and examples, the book appeals to researchers worldwide. It offers a comprehensive exploration of qualitative research in the digital world, catering to the diverse needs and interests of readers across different regions and disciplines.

Overall, these pedagogical features are thoughtfully integrated to enhance the learning experience, promote global engagement, and equip readers with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate qualitative research in the digital age effectively.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The book is structured into 14 chapters, categorized into four main themes. The first theme, '**Research Methodologies and Philosophies**', encompasses Chapters 1 and 2, which explore the adaptation to the digital landscape, the theory and philosophy of online qualitative research, and research design and ethics in online settings. The second theme, '**Digital Research Tools and Techniques**', covered in Chapters 3 to 9, discusses various digital methodologies essential for online qualitative research, including digital ethnography, netnography, and online interviews. The third theme, '**Data Analysis and Interpretation**', explored in Chapters 10 to 12, focuses on analysing qualitative data collected digitally through methods such as discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Finally, the fourth theme, '**Data Management and Technological Reflections**', discussed in Chapters 13 and 14, addresses practical aspects of managing qualitative research data in the digital age and reflects on the broader implications of technological advancements for qualitative research.

The book begins by asserting the importance for researchers of embracing the digital landscape in contemporary research, particularly within qualitative studies focused on human experiences and behaviours. It stresses the integration of digital technologies across various research stages, from data collection to analysis and interpretation. This integration is highlighted for its ability to capture the complexities inherent in qualitative research effectively. Moreover, the chapter explores the ethical considerations and the transformative role of technology in shaping research outcomes.

Transitioning to Research Methodologies and Philosophies, Chapter 1 illuminates the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of online qualitative research. Here, we delve into the definition and exploration of research conducted via digital platforms, unveiling its efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The chapter underscores qualitative research's interpretive nature, ideally suited for online contexts, enriching our understanding with diverse perspectives.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into research design and ethics within online settings, meticulously outlining ethical standards crucial for maintaining participants' rights and privacy. As we navigate the terrain of online research ethics, the chapter emphasizes the pivotal role of ethics review boards in ensuring ethical conduct and integrity.

As the journey unfolds into Digital Research Tools and Techniques (Chapters 3 to 9), we explore a myriad of innovative methodologies tailored for the digital realm. Chapter 3 introduces digital ethnography and netnography as methods for online

qualitative research. It elucidates the processes involved in conducting these methods, along with their benefits and challenges. Ethical considerations associated with digital ethnography and netnography are also explored within this chapter.

The concept of digital diaries takes centre stage in Chapter 4, highlighting their evolution and significance in the digital era. The chapter discusses how digital diaries offer researchers a nuanced understanding of human experiences and behaviours, leveraging technology for data collection and analysis effectively.

Chapter 5 introduces the ALARA model of information search, focusing on the role of Information Custodians in facilitating access to information for Information Searchers. It elaborates on the components of the model and its application within digital qualitative research contexts.

Screencasting as a novel methodology for online data collection is explored in Chapter 6, elucidating its concept and potential applications in academic research. The chapter discusses how screencasting enables the capture of on-screen activities accompanied by audio, thereby enhancing data collection processes.

Chapter 7 delves into online interviews as a prevalent mode of data collection in qualitative research, emphasizing their efficiency and privacy. It examines various modes of online interviews, their applications, and relevance across disciplines, offering insights into conducting in-depth interviews online.

In Chapter 8, online focus group discussions are explored, highlighting their significance in qualitative research. The chapter provides guidance on planning, conducting, and moderating online focus group discussions, while also addressing challenges related to technical, personal, ethical, and pragmatic aspects.

Chapter 9 introduces the e-Delphi method as a practical approach to online data collection, emphasizing its relevance and process. It discusses how the e-Delphi method facilitates consensus-building among experts and its application in qualitative research.

Shifting gears to Data Analysis and Interpretation (Chapters 10 to 11), we delve into the intricacies of discourse analysis, thematic analysis, and content analysis. Chapter 10 offers a comprehensive exploration of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, shedding light on their significance and application within the realm of online qualitative research. These methods are meticulously dissected, revealing their capacity to unveil the intricate meanings embedded within communication. By delving into the underlying ideologies and power structures inherent in discourse, this chapter underscores their pivotal role in qualitative inquiry.

Transitioning to Chapter 11, we are introduced to qualitative data analysis, with a specific focus on thematic analysis. Here, we embark on a journey of identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data, a process that transcends various research paradigms. Through a detailed examination of both inductive and deductive approaches, the chapter navigates through the steps of data familiarization, ultimately culminating in the definition of core themes. While highlighting the advantages of thematic analysis, including its flexibility and accessibility, the chapter also candidly addresses the challenges posed by broad interpretations and personal biases.

In Chapter 12, the spotlight shifts to content analysis as yet another indispensable method for analysing qualitative data. The systematic approach of content analysis is unravelled, offering insights into its efficacy in examining words, themes, and concepts across diverse domains, including communication sciences. By delving into the types, processes, advantages, and disadvantages of content analysis, this chapter underscores its paramount importance in the landscape of online research, serving as a cornerstone for qualitative inquiry.

Finally, in Data Management and Technological Reflections (Chapters 13 and 14), we confront the complexities of managing qualitative data in the digital age. Chapter 13 focuses on data management in qualitative research, particularly in the digital age. It addresses the challenges associated with managing diverse datasets and offers best practices for organizing, documenting, storing, and preserving qualitative research data.

Lastly, Chapter 14 reflects on the advances of digital technology and their implications for qualitative research. It underscores the importance of technological preparedness for researchers, the value of qualitative research in complementing quantitative approaches, and the need to anticipate and prepare for future challenges posed by technological advancements. The chapter provides actionable plans for researchers to effectively engage with digital technology.

KEEPING TABS WITH THE BASICS

As we conclude this chapter and prepare for the exploration into qualitative research in a digital world, it's crucial to emphasize the foundational principles that underpin effective research practices, regardless of the technological advancements at our disposal. While this book provides valuable insights into various data collection methods and qualitative research strategies, it's essential to remain mindful of the fundamental tenets that shape research endeavours.

Ethical considerations remain paramount in research, particularly in the digital age. Ensuring that proper consent and permissions are obtained from participants, and that data is used as promised while treating participants fairly, is essential. Referencing the chapter on data management plans can provide valuable guidance in navigating these ethical complexities.

Additionally, strategic sampling is critical in qualitative research. Unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative research relies on purposive sampling to ensure that the right individuals are selected to provide insights into the research questions. Consideration should also be given to the prospective large dataset that may be collected, the time required for data analysis, and the commitment level of participants.

Research design plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of your study. It's imperative to clearly define your research questions, identify gaps in the existing literature, and select the most appropriate methods to address these questions. With the plethora of research methods discussed in this book, maintaining an open-minded

approach and viewing it as an opportunity to expand your methodological toolkit is essential.

Mixed methods approaches, such as combining qualitative and quantitative research, offer rich insights and are worth considering. Triangulation, which involves using multiple methods to corroborate findings, can enhance the credibility and validity of your research outcomes.

Moreover, embracing the digital context of research opens up a myriad of possibilities. Leveraging digital data collected through various tools and employing digital tools for data analysis can enhance the depth and breadth of your research insights.

Effective planning is crucial, whether you're a PhD or master's student, to manage your time effectively and meet the expectations of your research timeline. Finally, the ability to creatively communicate your research findings is paramount. Ensuring that insights are conveyed in a compelling manner, with actionable implications for both theory and practice, can maximize the impact of your research in the digital landscape.

By incorporating these considerations into your research approach, you can navigate the complexities of qualitative research in a digital world effectively and make meaningful contributions to your field.

CONCLUSION

Through Simbi's journey, as depicted in the opening case vignette, our exploration of qualitative research in the digital age has vividly showcased the transformative potential inherent in blending traditional methodologies with modern digital advancements. As researchers, educators, and practitioners, we stand at the nexus of significant change, where the contours of inquiry are intricately shaped by the multifaceted dynamics of the digital realm.

We have traversed through the intricacies of data availability, collection, and analysis, recognizing the vast opportunities and ethical considerations that accompany the abundance of digital data. From exploring the nuances of social media interactions to harnessing advanced analytical tools, we have witnessed the evolution of qualitative research practices in response to the digital revolution.

Moreover, we have identified the diverse audience and interdisciplinary applications of qualitative research in the digital context, underscoring its relevance across academic, professional, and industry domains. Whether pursuing postgraduate studies, conducting industry projects, or collaborating on research endeavours, the principles and methodologies discussed in this book serve as a guiding compass for navigating the dynamic landscape of qualitative inquiry.

As we embrace the foundational principles of effective research practices, including ethical considerations, strategic sampling, and research design, we equip ourselves with the tools needed to conduct rigorous and impactful research in the

digital age. By remaining open-minded, adaptable, and committed to advancing knowledge, we can harness the power of qualitative research to drive positive change and foster inclusive, equitable, and compassionate digital spaces for all.

In essence, our exploration into qualitative research in the digital era reaffirms the profound interconnectedness of human experiences, technological advancements, and scholarly inquiry. As we embark on this journey of discovery and innovation, let us embrace the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, guided by a shared commitment to excellence, integrity, and ethical conduct in research. Together, we can continue to unravel the mysteries of the digital realm and unlock new frontiers of knowledge and understanding for generations to come.

Closing Case Vignette

Maya's Digital Journey: Empowering Youth Through Qualitative Research

In the bustling city of New York, Maya, a dedicated researcher and passionate advocate for social justice, embarks on a groundbreaking qualitative study exploring the impact of digital activism on marginalized communities. Inspired by her own experiences as an activist, and fuelled by a desire to amplify the voices of the unheard, Maya delves into the intricate interplay between online advocacy efforts and offline social change.

Navigating the labyrinth of social media platforms, Maya immerses herself in virtual communities where grassroots movements thrive, and dissent finds a digital stage. Through her ethnographic lens, she uncovers the power dynamics at play within online spaces, shedding light on how digital platforms serve as catalysts for collective action and solidarity among marginalized groups.

As Maya sifts through mountains of digital data, from viral hashtags to impassioned blog posts, she grapples with ethical dilemmas surrounding privacy, consent, and digital surveillance. Mindful of the need to protect the voices of her participants, she navigates the digital landscape with integrity and compassion, ensuring that every narrative is honoured, and every story is told with dignity.

As her research unfolds, Maya finds herself at the forefront of a new wave of scholarship that bridges the gap between online activism and offline social change. Through her rigorous analysis and unwavering commitment to social justice, Maya demonstrates the transformative potential of qualitative research in the digital age, inspiring researchers around the world to harness the power of digital platforms for positive social impact.

Maya's journey serves as a beacon of hope in an increasingly interconnected world, where the lines between virtual and physical activism blur, and where the voices of the marginalized find resonance in the digital sphere. As we bid farewell to this chapter, let us carry Maya's spirit of inquiry and advocacy forward, forging new paths of discovery and empowerment in the ever-evolving landscape of qualitative research.

(Continued)

Reflective Questions for Consideration

- 1 How does Maya's journey in navigating the complexities of online activism resonate with your own experiences or observations in the digital realm?
- 2 Reflecting on Maya's ethical considerations regarding privacy and consent in her research, what are some potential challenges you foresee when conducting qualitative research in digital spaces?
- 3 Considering Maya's dedication to social justice and advocacy, how can qualitative research in the digital age be leveraged to amplify the voices of marginalized communities and drive positive social change?

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1

PHILOSOPHIES OF RESEARCH

Opening Case Vignette

Transitioning from Offline to Online Markets

Betty, a final-year business studies student, decided to study digital transformations in family-owned traditional businesses and identify the challenges that persist as a part of her final project. Increasing access to online food ordering applications, availability of fast alternatives at local supermarkets, and changing food consumption patterns of consumers intrigued Betty, which led her to explore how traditional businesses that offer regional delicacies embrace digitization and navigate their business. She aims to understand these businesses' challenges and identify possible solutions.

Betty comes across a local chimney cake business owned and run by the Simsons, a family that has been running the company in Hungary for four generations. She identifies more local business families and explores their experiences and concerns. However, her work gets disrupted due to the pandemic restrictions, and Betty is forced to conduct her research online.

While conducting the research, Betty considers the philosophical ideas and theories that align with online qualitative research. She decides to conduct online interviews, adopting an interpretive approach. As Betty progresses, she structures her research under the selected paradigm and deals with the limitations of this method. However, she manoeuvres her research while following the research philosophy of interpretivism.

Considering Betty's reasoning and challenges, let us understand how online qualitative research methods can study human subjects and their perceptions and address the hows and whys of their behaviour, perspectives, and opinions. The online qualitative data collection methods are used across disciplines, including social sciences, education, sociology, psychology, anthropology, marketing, and nursing, for data that cannot be collected and comprehended using quantitative

(Continued)

research methods. Owing to this, we unravel that online qualitative methods are not driven by a unified field of theory but are driven by diverse perspectives and practices unique to each field of research. The diverse methodological approaches adopted in online qualitative research reflect the same. This also leads to a constant debate about the various online qualitative methods and the underlying theoretical assumptions that ensue.

This chapter and subsequent chapters in this book neither prove the idealness of these methods nor suggest the superiority of any method over others. On the contrary, the chapter explains various philosophical paradigms that exist and continue to support online qualitative research methods.

Reflective Questions for Consideration

- 1 How does Betty need to prepare to conduct an online research study that focuses on individual experiences?
- 2 Which research philosophy must be adopted when exploring the lived realities of individuals with unique experiences and why?
- 3 How can different research paradigms change the course of a research study and enhance the credibility of the findings in the digital realm?

INTRODUCTION

The shift to conducting research online has opened up new possibilities for qualitative researchers to connect with participants in online settings. Online qualitative research embraces a novel mode of inquiry using different paradigms and other computational approaches to generate meaningful findings. It enables the researcher to engage with participants online, observe, collect, and analyse data. The study's scope, design, and objectives reflect different philosophical positions the researcher can adopt in collecting data online. Each philosophical position offers a unique lens to observe the participants, comprehend their mindsets, and advance novel insights for analysis.

In this context, online qualitative research is expanding while still following the philosophical principles for collecting data. Therefore, in this chapter, we begin by defining online qualitative research and framing the context for the upcoming chapters in this book. The chapter highlights the theoretical paradigms and the epistemological debates between different perspectives. Encapsulating each paradigm's historical background, the chapter discusses ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions for each research paradigm. It is followed by a detailed overview of different paradigms that ends with a reflection on their advantages and disadvantages.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Understand different paradigms underlining online qualitative research.
- List the philosophical concepts in practices of online qualitative inquiry, effectively opening the process of thought in qualitative research.
- Orient conventional and contemporary approaches to online qualitative research by researchers and practitioners.

ONLINE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Online qualitative research methods are an extension of the existing qualitative research methods, enabling creativity, technological modesty, and adaptation. Many definitions of qualitative research can be applied to online qualitative research. A definition by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) states that qualitative research helps researchers understand the meanings constructed by people from their lived and distinctive experiences. Another definition by Lune and Berg (2017) emphasizes adopting qualitative research methods to get a narrative and descriptive account of a phenomenon. The definition advocates an interpretive inquiry against a positivist approach. These definitions are well applied in the context of online qualitative research. However, to understand better, we refer to the following definition from the Association of Qualitative Research (AQR, 2019):

Online qualitative research refers to the qualitative research conducted online via digital platforms, online applications or through social media sites. The data collected includes participant's perspectives collected directly, in the form of blogs, vlogs, through market research, and digital diaries.

For instance, understanding the consumption patterns of Millennials on Instagram and how they manage their relationships via this channel would be qualitative research. Users and platforms would also play an important role as their characteristics and features would be studied extensively and significantly impact the outcomes.

An online qualitative approach enables researchers to collect data online while significantly reducing time and cost, and overcoming the barriers of space. It benefits both the researcher and the participants. Researchers argue that online qualitative research allows participants to have a convenient environment without any obligations to be physically present. For instance, while studying the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on content development, researchers can conduct an online inquiry with content developers, technocrats, AI experts, and content writers. The online search would be fast, and advertisers and marketers could easily use the results. Thus, online qualitative research is quite effective and works well for the

industry and academia as the research provides real solutions via studies and significant implications that companies worldwide can use easily.

Overall, it can be understood that online qualitative research involves collecting data online in the form of audio, video, images, text, or sounds and then analysing them. For instance, how mobile music apps (such as Spotify) are consumed by different demographics; their online music files would be thoroughly used and analysed to address this research topic.

However, online qualitative methods avoid typical generalizations and focus on subjective realities. In addition, online qualitative research methods are discussed in the book’s respective chapters. These methods include online in-depth interviews, online focus group discussions, screencasting, digital ethnography, netnography, ZMAT, ALARA, e-Delphi, and digital diaries, as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Online Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative Research Methods	Online Qualitative Research Methods
One-on-one in-depth interviews	Online interviews, phone interviews, mobile diaries, Zoom interactions
Ethnography	Online bulletin boards, digital diaries, social media tracking/listening, online immersion, netnography
Focus group discussions	Online group chats, online focus groups, synchronous and asynchronous bulletin boards
Delphi	E-Delphi, telephonic interactions, online communications, email communication, digital chatrooms

The methods for collecting qualitative data online are structured yet flexible and take an iterative approach. For instance, in live streaming studies, while looking to better understand beach streaming behaviour, the researchers would go through multiple iterations as people in Australia would be different from those in the UK and the US, and so their live streaming patterns while on the beach would differ. The quintessential features of online qualitative research methods are participant observation, open-ended questions, prolonged online engagement, inductive inquiry, and probing to align with the goals of the research study.

For example, while researching Generation Z and Generation Y to understand their consumption of brands in the metaverse, an inductive approach would help generate exciting and novel insights.

This is because the metaverse environment is new, and these individuals’ adoption, usage, and consumption patterns are very different from the real world. New constructs, concepts, variables, or even theories could be generated using the inductive approach, allowing the researchers to immerse in the field and explore the new domain. However, before understanding these methods, it is crucial to understand

the epistemological landscape of research. It includes the critical research paradigms discussed in the sections below.

PILLARS OF A RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm is fundamental to research inquiry. It is a set of beliefs, assumptions, and understandings associated with the theories and practices that guide the research design. A research paradigm consists of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and research methodology, as shown in Figure 1.1 below.

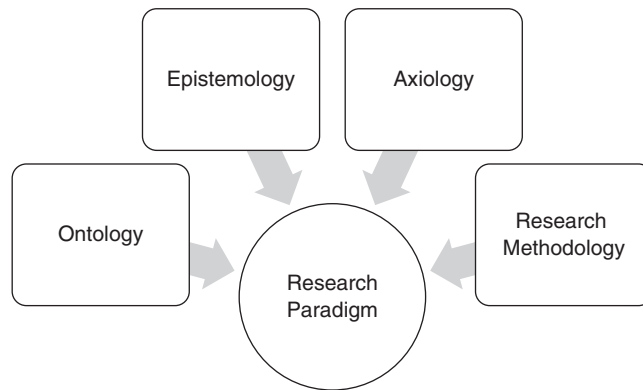


Figure 1.1 Research Paradigm (Source: Authors)

Ontology: It answers the question, ‘What is reality?’ Is there one reality, or do multiple realities exist in a phenomenon? An example would be, ‘Does advanced AI impact political communication during general political elections?’ There are numerous realities to this question: ‘Yes, it does impact’, ‘No, there is no impact’, or ‘There are other collaborative factors that may cause an impact’.

Therefore, ontology is the nature of reality as presumed by the participants or respondents in a study. It also includes the assumptions researchers make to explore a phenomenon. Researchers ask the following questions:

- What is the reality or realities in the social or natural surroundings?
- How does one know what they know?
- How does one understand or conceptualize things?

Let us understand this better with the help of an example and Table 1.2.

In the healthcare segment, the ontological stance of a researcher is driven by the beliefs and assumptions about the nature of treatment, the patient’s health, the diagnosis of a medical illness, and healthcare practices and technological support. Let us see some relevant examples from the healthcare segment in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Ontological Stances of a Researcher

Ontological Stance	Explanation
Biomedical ontological stance	There is an underlying assumption that biological mechanisms are critical in explaining the health and illness of a patient by viewing the human body as a machine. Their key focus is on medical treatments, equipment, surgeries, drugs recommended, and life support. For example, to explore the impact of crises such as COVID-19 on a patient's mental health, a researcher will focus on the patient's immune system, the kind of drugs prescribed, the timely availability of a ventilator, and the type of medical attention received, the use of AI and robots in providing better health care services without human contact, and early detection of disease so that prevention is possible.
The social constructivist ontological stance	There is an underlying assumption that cultural and social factors shape the health and illness of a human being. They explore the characteristics and sub-factors instead of considering only the malfunctions of the human body. For example, to explore the impact of crises such as COVID-19 on a patient's mental health, a researcher will focus on health disparities, communication about the disease, the role of social determinants and support from peers and family, and the role of social media influencers and social robots in affecting the behaviour of the followers for fashion and beauty products.
Critical realist ontological stance	There is an underlying assumption that reality is independent of our perceptions and understanding of society. These researchers believe that the fact that it exists is partial and often mediated by the interactions between biological and social factors affecting health and illness. For example, to explore the impact of crises such as COVID-19 on a patient's mental health, a researcher will explore the interactions between the immune system, medical interventions, social acceptance of the individual, and mental and physical well-being.

Epistemology: As the study of knowledge, epistemology answers the question, ‘How do we know reality?’ It includes the methods of acquiring knowledge and the validity parameters. An example would be, ‘How do we know whether all political parties use AI in political communication during elections?’

Such questions describe the reality or realities acquired, understood, and utilized for demonstrating the findings of a research study. Epistemology encourages researchers to ask the following questions:

- What is knowledge?
- How can knowledge be acquired, and what are its limits?
- Is the knowledge trustworthy? Is further investigation required?
- What is acceptable knowledge in a particular discipline?

Researchers may take several epistemological stances, including positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and pragmatism. Table 1.3 explains them with examples.

Table 1.3 Epistemological Stances of a Researcher

Epistemological Stances	Explanation
Positivism	The positivism paradigm's epistemological stance is grounded in objectivity and measurement. Researchers aim to generalize the findings of the research and establish them universally. For example, a randomized controlled trial experiment can be conducted to measure electric cars' effectiveness in developing economies. The experiment will help measure the growth of electric cars, their impact on the economy, and market share.
Interpretivism	In the interpretivism paradigm, the epistemological stance depends on human perceptions, lived realities, and unique social interactions. Subjectivity is central to interpretivism, as it does not aim for generalizability. For example, a researcher can conduct one-on-one or online interviews to understand students' perceptions of hybrid learning, which will help understand the students' experiences and narratives.
Critical theory	In the critical paradigm, the epistemological stance is to identify power dynamics, inequalities, injustice, hegemony, and disparities in social structures. For example, to study the disparities in the healthcare segment, researchers critically evaluate the socio-demographic factors, inequalities, and the VIP culture that restricts access to medical facilities.
Pragmatism	In the pragmatism paradigm, the epistemological stance of a researcher is to demonstrate practical applications. Researchers are keen on generating theoretically sound findings with real-world implications. For example, to study the implementation of a new healthcare intervention for adults battling with mental health issues, researchers can decide to use mixed methods to collect online qualitative and quantitative data and understand how the intervention works in practice.

Considering the examples above, we can infer that epistemological stances about the phenomenon implicate the researchers. They design the study, select methods for data collection, and draw interpretations based on these epistemological stances. For instance, researchers can explore the stereotypical patterns evoked through immersive technologies as the image, text, colour, and other stimuli are developed with the predetermined mindset. The interpretations would help carefully use these elements across the markets as cultural, sub-cultural, and social factors drive them.

Axiology: Refers to the values the researchers assume that impact the research process. Axiology examines the issue of right and wrong and deals with perceptual biases that may persist. It makes the researcher consider the following questions:

- What should be done to respect and protect the rights of each participant?
- What ethical guidelines are to be followed during the research?
- What are the cultural and intercultural issues or biases that need to be taken into consideration?
- How do you conduct the research respectfully?

Researchers’ axiological stance also determines the positioning of the research and then plays a critical role in the interpretations of findings. Table 1.4 presents some examples of axiological views that researchers may take while conducting online qualitative research.

Table 1.4 Axiological Stances of a Researcher

Axiological stance	Explanation
Participant-centredness	This axiological stance encourages the importance of transparently incorporating participants’ perceptions, thoughts, ideologies, and expectations as shared by them. For example, to study the impact of cyberbullying, a researcher may prioritize online in-depth interviews with the participants to explore their experiences and challenges while keeping their details anonymous.
Evidence-based practice	This axiological stance focuses on using the best available evidence to guide interpretations of data. A detailed account of participants’ insights in memos, notes, field observations, and reflexive notes helps support the data analysis process. For example, a researcher may conduct a netnographic study to explore participants’ self-expression on social media platforms and use social media listening, observations, and interactions to strengthen the evidence.
Cultural humility	This axiological stance reinstates the importance of respecting the culture, values, beliefs, and differences. Such researchers are cautious about not making random assumptions or going by stereotypes. For example, a researcher may use the e-Delphi method to gain expert perspectives and experiences about the metaverse. The research design of the study will be driven by inclusivity in terms of gender, professional experience, age, and ethnicity of the participants.

Research Methodology: The selection of the research design and methods to answer the question, ‘How to discover the reality or realities?’ Research methodology includes choosing an appropriate data collection, processing, and analysis method.

In online qualitative research, the research methods are selected to demonstrate findings that are valid and can be comprehended.

Methodology is the strategy or action plan that determines selecting an appropriate method under a research paradigm. The term refers to the research design, methods employed, and process followed to collect, manage, and interpret the data while asking the following questions:

- How can the reality be explored?
- What is the ideal population to explore the reality?
- Which methodological approach will be suited to find the reality?
- How does the data need to be interpreted to find the reality?
- How many realities exist?

Qualitative and quantitative are the two methodological approaches that are fundamental to a research study. Scholars combine or sequentially use the two approaches to support the study's findings. One approach may be used to validate the results of the other approach. For example, in healthcare research, a researcher may collect data on patients dealing with mental illness through hospital records and then explore how their family supports them by investigating their narratives online or offline. Table 1.5 below explains the methodological approaches with suitable examples.

Table 1.5 Methodological Approaches to Research

Methodology	Explanation
Quantitative methodology	The quantitative approach focuses on empirical and objective measurement. It relates to the positivism paradigm, believing that only one reality exists: the sole truth. For example, a quantitative researcher can collect data from experiments, randomized controlled studies, survey designs, and statistical data analysis.
Qualitative methodology	The qualitative approach focuses on exploring subjective realities, experiences of individuals, and multiple perspectives. The researchers believe in various realities and, thus, non-generalizable findings. For example, a researcher using the interpretivism paradigm may use qualitative methods like structured or semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, the Delphi method, ethnography, etc.
Online qualitative methodology	An extension of the qualitative approach is the online qualitative approach, where researchers can collect data online with online interviews, online focus group discussions, e-Delphi methods, digital ethnography, and netnography. These methods are discussed in detail as individual chapters in this book.
Mixed methodology	The mixed-method approach emphasizes using multiple or a combination of two or more methods for a specific context or study. Researchers using a mixed-method approach are driven by pragmatism, looking for practical solutions and addressing real-world problems.

Therefore, we can argue that epistemologies in qualitative research are diverse and complex, and we discuss them in the context of online qualitative research methods. The epistemological landscape encompasses different paradigms or world-views that guide qualitative inquiry. A paradigm, as defined, is a set of beliefs, assumptions, values, and guiding principles that enable the investigation. The research paradigm is crucial as it influences the research design for the qualitative inquiry, research questions, the method for collecting data, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of study findings. The most commonly referred to paradigms for qualitative research that are also applied to online qualitative research are interpretivism and positivism or post-positivism.

These research paradigms are essential because they combine the research philosophy with the research methods to find the results. Research paradigms influence all the disciplines and types of research approaches and help increase the quality of the findings.

For instance, the dark side of AI and its influence and effects can be studied using different paradigms and approaches. An interpretive paradigm would help understand the dimensions, factors, and processes that create issues and challenges while using AI to provide services. Positivism would help understand the effect of these issues on engagement with the users and their experiences with the companies.

Let us now discuss the different research paradigms: interpretivism, positivism or post-positivism, and pragmatism. We discuss these paradigms and explain how they provide a philosophical framework for online qualitative research and other approaches.

TYPES OF RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Interpretivism

Interpretivists believe that there is no single reality or one common truth. There exist multiple realities and subjective interpretations. The researchers explore new meanings attached to an action and consider the participants' diverse perspectives. Interpretivism aims to address the 'why' question in research. For example, why do luxury hotel guests need a mixed-reality experience? There would be diverse views from different types of guests, enhancing the overall experience as the hotels would consider all the perspectives. New meanings and hotel associations could be reflected by the hotel's virtual and augmented reality usage and how these immersive technologies are adopted, used, liked, and consumed by the guests with various personas. These insights help provide personalized services to the guest as well.

Walsham (1993) posits interpretivism as a paradigm positioned in the knowledge of reality, human interactions, the social construction of reality, and the actions of human actors. Therefore, there is no objective reality. Geertz (1973) further explains that interpretivism undertakes the symbolic dimensions of a social interaction. It investigates life's existential dilemmas and answers complex phenomena. Therefore, it can be inferred that interpretivism reveals multiple realities with the help of in-depth exploration and commitment. For instance, even the realities of human and virtual influencers can be explored, and they have different roles in the lives of Millennials with their associated authenticity and credibility.

Advantages

- It focuses on personal narratives, individual meanings, and participants' experiences. Interpretivism embraces the subjectivity of the participants and does not force an opinion or thought to be generalized. It emphasizes generating unique insights that may or may not be generalized.
- It allows the researcher to implement creativity and sensitivity in collecting data. The interpretive paradigm enables researchers to think and conduct research as per the situation. Sensitivity and responsiveness are critical since they focus on dealing with human subjects and their unique experiences.

- It is suited to cross-cultural and even interdisciplinary studies concerning human beings. While comparing different cultures, practices, policies, and disciplines, the interpretive paradigm enables researchers to leverage the data generated and generate meaningful insights.
- The data generated is raw, rich, and reliable as it is not oriented to one specific truth. The interpretive paradigm is an inclusive philosophical approach.
- It allows prolonged engagement and immersion with participants. One critical tenet of interpretivism is the researcher's presence among participants. This presence can be both online and offline.

Disadvantages

- It is overly dependent on the researcher's reflexivity and often may lead to problems in the findings, making it difficult to propose or test a hypothesis. Personal goals or beliefs of the researcher may disrupt the process.
- Personal bias is possible as interactions are motivated by personal relationships and may be a continued problem as relationships last longer and can continue to affect the study outcomes.
- The data can be complex and lead to non-conclusive findings. Raw and rich data may be challenging to manage due to diverse opinions, thoughts, and experiences and can cause a lack of rigour and lead to misleading findings.

Positivism

Positivist scholars or researchers idealize one single reality and a truthful answer. Due to this, the paradigm of positivism encourages using quantitative research methods for collecting objective data. Using quantitative methods and statistical analysis, they aim to prove or disprove a hypothesis by investigating the relationship between two or more variables. For example, education, self-governance, and privacy affect service encounters and user experience. The relationships of these variables can be easily studied while using this paradigm.

The positivism paradigm revolves around measuring and generalizing the reality within society (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019). The data is measurable with minimal human intervention or personal narratives. This paradigm advocates the creation of scientific knowledge validated through facts and numbers. Positivism views knowledge differently from interpretivism. It emphasizes logic and rigidity to capture accurate reality. However, in contemporary times, social scientists who adhere to this scientific method of inquiry are called post-positivists. We discuss that in the section below.

Advantages

- It concentrates on scientific methods, factual data, and objectivity for conducting research and collecting data. Positivism operates on objectivity and thus focuses on generalizable results.

- It allows researchers to collect more individualistic than collective data for any phenomenon. As a result, findings are generalizable and can contribute significantly to the body of knowledge.
- Empirical experimentation contributes to codifying high scientific results. Positivism is valued for its high credibility due to the use of rigorous scientific methods and tests to collect quantifiable data.

Disadvantages

- It is overly dependent on perfect scientific standards that may sometimes not exist. Unfortunately, the paradigm devalues subjectivity and does not promote creative data collection methods.
- It is a complex and rigid philosophical framework that can overlook a social phenomenon and emphasize only scientific results that can be quantified.
- There is minimal or no interaction with the study's respondents, making it challenging for the researchers to filter respondents according to the scope of the study.
- It assumes that all processes regarding relationships leading to descriptive results can be measured. Such methods lack in-depth explanations.

Post-Positivism

Post-positivism admits to dealing with the imperfections of society but still believes in objectivity. Post-positivists believe and practise interpretation directly from data collected systematically and scientifically. However, scholars often distance themselves from the rigid epistemological position of positivism and enhance the theoretical and philosophical perspective while minimizing researchers' bias. Post-positivist researchers recognize the limitations of qualitative research but attempt to strive for an objective truth or a partially objective reality. The end goal of post-positivists is to generate a reasonable explanation of the realities with the help of scientific inquiry. For example, the effect of the co-creation of experiences on user engagement in the gaming environment can be easily studied using this paradigm.

Advantages

- The post-positivism paradigm balances the extremes of positivism and interpretivism and follows a practical approach to collecting data. A 'Socratic Method' focuses on the interrelated themes that may reflect pluralism.
- It helps explore the issues and experiences of the majority and produce results acceptable to the majority. Thus, it includes both subjective and objective findings. The post-positivism approach helps understand new realities without being aggressively dogmatic.

- It focuses on exploring the different dimensions of a phenomenon, the values, and passion without losing objectivity. This paves the way for the construction of grand theories.

Disadvantages

- Often, the objectivity of this paradigm is under scrutiny by researchers as it also considers the collective perspectives and unique opinions of the individuals. There is no fixed path to the process.
- Researchers' positions and biases are questioned as the researchers may focus on high-reliability respondents who may not be relevant to the study.

Pragmatism

Pragmatists embrace the best of positivism and interpretivism. Pragmatism advocates that the situations and context of a research study determine reality. The philosophical framework for a research study is dependent on the research question. This paradigm combines the principles of positivism and interpretivism to use both qualitative and quantitative methodology. They suggest a mixed-method approach can successfully and scientifically answer the research question. For example, what would be the multi-sensory stimulus and its effect on the decision-making process of the male consumers for their personal care products and services in the metaverse. Researchers would have to conduct online interviews to understand how the multi-sensory stimuli such as auditory, visual, and other factors affect these individuals and subsequently would measure the effect of these stimuli on the decision-making process; thus, interpretive and positivist paradigms would help.

Advantages

- It focuses on finding practical and real-life solutions for the problems. The pragmatic paradigm is also helpful in understanding a phenomenon when prior studies produce unexpected results.
- Contextual understanding is central to the philosophy of pragmatism and is reflected in the research process. It enables researchers to analyse factors relevant to the study conducted holistically.
- The aim is to conduct a realistic analysis of uncertainties and produce practical findings that may be generalized.
- The paradigm is flexible yet ethically operates to conduct a research inquiry and is easy to describe and report.

Disadvantages

- Scholars often find a lack of foundational principles challenging as it combines both positivism and interpretivism and can confuse the researchers and mislead them into generating irrelevant findings.

- There is an underestimation or role of values in a research study. Post-positive studies are lengthy and time-consuming and thus often overlook values, causing discrepancies in the findings.
- There is a risk of short-term bias in such studies as researchers find it challenging to decide the order of studies and the sequential patterns, causing researchers to become biased.

While most social sciences, marketing, humanities, healthcare, and technology studies operate from a positivist or interpretive paradigm, many scholars combine the two. For example, a study focusing on market research exploring the psychological enablers for stay-at-home mothers' online shopping behaviour can use qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry for enhanced outcomes. An online focus group discussion with stay-at-home mothers and an online survey can generate insightful data and produce scientific results. Table 1.6 highlights the research quality while adopting either of the paradigms.

Table 1.6 Approaches to Research Quality in Positivism and Interpretivism
(Source: Adapted from Alborough & Hansen, 2022)

Issue	Positivist Paradigm	Interpretivist Paradigm	Application in Online Qualitative Research
Truth value	Internal validity / truthfulness of results	Reliability of results	Does the research truthfully interpret the participants' narratives?
Applicability	External validity / generalizability of results	Transferability of findings	Are the findings applicable to another context? Can they be transferred?
Consistency	Reliability of data	Dependability on the data	Is the data collection process consistent and reliable?
Neutrality	Objectivity of the data	Confirmability of results	Are interpretations derived from the data and justifiable?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of online qualitative research, emphasizing its significance in contemporary research endeavours. Through an exploration of different theoretical paradigms and epistemological debates, we have laid the groundwork for understanding the philosophical underpinnings that guide online qualitative inquiry.

Online qualitative research offers a dynamic and innovative approach to data collection and analysis, enabling researchers to engage with participants in virtual spaces and capture rich, nuanced insights into human experiences and phenomena. By leveraging digital platforms and tools, researchers can transcend geographical barriers and explore diverse perspectives, generating valuable knowledge that contributes to both academia and industry.

Moreover, we have delved into the pillars of research paradigms, including ontology, epistemology, axiology, and research methodology, elucidating their role in shaping the research process. From interpretivism to positivism, post-positivism, and pragmatism, each paradigm offers distinct perspectives on reality, knowledge acquisition, ethical considerations, and methodological approaches.

While each paradigm has its strengths and limitations, researchers must carefully consider the philosophical orientation that best aligns with their research objectives and the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Whether aiming to uncover subjective meanings through interpretive inquiry or striving for objective truths through positivist methodologies, researchers must navigate the epistemological landscape with reflexivity and rigour.

Furthermore, the discussion of various online qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, digital ethnography, and netnography, has highlighted the diverse array of tools available to researchers in the digital age. These methods offer structured yet flexible approaches to data collection, facilitating deep engagement with participants and the exploration of emergent themes and patterns.

In essence, online qualitative research represents a dynamic and evolving field that continues to push the boundaries of traditional research paradigms. By embracing digital technologies and innovative methodologies, researchers can unlock new insights and advance knowledge in diverse disciplines. As we embark on this journey of exploration and discovery, let us remain mindful of the philosophical foundations that guide our inquiry and the ethical responsibilities inherent in our research endeavours.

Closing Case Vignette

Understanding the Role of Cultural and Sub-Cultural Practices in Influencing Employee Relocation

Star Rise, a recruitment agency, has worked with a German Automotive Company for four years. The agency profiles and hires highly skilled employees and helps them relocate. While Star Rise has a competitive criterion for hiring, the company still faces some last-minute cancellations from employees who decline to relocate owing to cultural challenges they may face in a new country. As a reputable recruitment agency, Star Rise does not wish to earn a bad name and waste resources. Following many such instances, the company has hired a team of three final-year students to explore cultural and sub-cultural practices that may affect the employees' decisions.

The team is designated to interview the prospective employee and one additional family member online. The team commences their work and conducts multiple rounds of interviews with the employees. They delve deep into understanding the individual's

(Continued)

cultural roots and practices. They also interview their family members, who, in most cases, are the spouses. The final analysis of the online interviews reveals that relocation is challenging for many as the company provides no support in relocating their spouses. It becomes very hectic, and individuals feel this will negatively affect their family life. Cultural differences do exist, but they are not non-negotiable.

The research team's findings highlight that some companies offer indefinite employment contracts but no family support, which concerns the individuals and sometimes becomes a barrier to their relocation. Companies that prioritize family relocation or spousal reunification foster a positive experience for potential employees and face minimal last-minute cancellations. The research team also develops a proposal for the incorporation of spousal support for relocation according to the immigration laws of the respective country. They submitted this report as their dissertation.

Reflective Questions for Consideration

- 1 Which philosophical paradigm guides the research study conducted by the team of researchers in the above case?
- 2 In what ways did the interviews conducted with family members contribute to understanding the expectations of the potential employees?
- 3 Considering the subjectivities that may exist, which other research paradigm can be adopted to conduct a follow-up study and understand the relocation patterns for the company?
- 4 How do the researchers use an interpretive approach to identify factors beyond culture in the context of employee relocation?

FURTHER READING

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