VIEWPOINT: GETTING YOUR QUALITATIVE SERVICE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper provides authors with guidelines for carrying out excellent qualitative service research. It describes the features that editors and reviewers use to evaluate qualitative research and pinpoints what authors can do to improve their manuscripts for publication.

Design: The paper identifies five features of excellent qualitative service research—relevance, rigor, integrity, narration, and impact—and describes them with a focus on what they mean and what authors can do to meet these standards.

Findings: The paper suggests that manuscripts are often rejected because they fail to meet key standards of excellent qualitative research. It calls for more discussion on research methodology and research ethics, especially when service research strives to make a difference, such as investigating critical service contexts or dealing with vulnerable participants.

Originality: This paper contributes to a better use and application of qualitative research methodology. It focuses on specific actions that researchers can take to improve the quality of their service research manuscripts.

Keywords: qualitative research, publishing, validity, excellence

INTRODUCTION

A manuscript that uses the right quotes to illustrate an interesting phenomenon allows the reader to get close and personal with the informants and events that inspired the researcher(s). This intimacy means that the reader can see the world through the eyes of the researcher(s) or, even better, the eyes of the informants. The reader might even go beyond solely reading the text and experience an "A-ha!" moment (Bansal and Corley, 2011). Qualitative research is great for addressing questions about what or how something occurred and for unraveling processes from the perspective of the informant. This paper takes a broad view on what constitutes excellent qualitative research, akin to the idea that "qualitative methodology is as much art as it is effort, piles of data, and time in the field" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

By excellent research we mean investigations that are meaningful, well conducted, well reported, and useful—i.e., topical research with sound, significant findings for the research community and simultaneously beneficial for others outside academia. In other words, we consider excellent research as research with high academic and practical credibility. Typically, but not exclusively, the former quality means that one's publications are highly cited, and the latter stands for valuable suggestions for more informed decision-making, new practices, and pertinent policy-making. In no way should this paper be interpreted as strict rules governing the evaluation and review process. Every article is unique and should be judged on its own merits. However, this paper has been influenced by our reviewing thousands of manuscripts as editors and associate editors for journals such as *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Journal of Service Management*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Journal of Service Research*, and as reviewers for all major journals for service research. The discussion is organized around five key features that define excellent research: relevance, rigor, integrity, narration, and impact. It is our hope that this paper can help authors reflect on their own research and turn it into excellent qualitative service research.

WHAT IS EXCELLENT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Based on our experiences as editors, reviewers, and authors, this paper discusses what makes research excellent and how to translate this excellence in a manuscript. We included some features of excellent qualitative research from the general discussion of excellence in research and added others that are particularly relevant to service research. The features cover the main components of a research project from start to finish, not solely the empirical study with qualitative data. This includes all aspects that are relevant for publishing the research, namely the nature of the main idea, designing and conducting the qualitative data collection and analysis, reporting the qualitative study, and describing its value. Apart from discussing the features of excellent research, our paper offers advice to researchers to advance qualitative research and publish it in peer-reviewed service research journals. Table 1 at the end of this section summarizes the features of excellent service research and advises on how to address each of them. The five features of excellent research are as follows:

- Relevance

- Rigor

- Integrity

- Narration

- Impact

The first and most fundamental feature of excellence is *relevance*. Relevance addresses the question that all research should answer: Why should one care about the topic and findings? Having a timely and interesting topic, questioning current assumptions, and producing new, valuable insights all contribute to increasing the relevance of the research. Currently, a great deal of research that is highly relevant pertains to technology, data-enabled business, healthcare, and transformative services. The relevance of future service research will increasingly relate to sustainability aspects that, despite their relevance, are receiving

limited attention. In the area of service research, which encompasses many different phenomena and is undergoing constant change, it should be easy to find meaningful topics and explore them using qualitative data. There are many ways to demonstrate relevance and find a topic that is valuable from a theoretic and business (not to mention social) point of view. Most powerful research has or should have several justifications for it.

The second fundamental feature is *rigor*, which refers to how well the researcher has carried out the study. Excellent qualitative research is based on purposeful research design and strict qualitative practices to achieve rigor and give credibility to the study. Most method literature concerns how to ensure such rigor in the practices of research methodology, which is not repeated here. Instead, Table 1 pinpoints several issues that are specifically relevant to service research. In the area of service research, there is no lack of new concepts, and many of these concepts refer to almost identical phenomena, which means that extra care is needed when using them. Furthermore, while metaphors are common and useful, it is important to avoid over-reliance on how these constructs guide qualitative research (such as customer journeys, user experience, value networks, and customer relationships) or how they are borrowed from other disciplines (such as ecosystems and actors).

Attention should be given to purposeful sampling (e.g., Patton, 1990) and the different choices in the research design (e.g., Saunders, 2011), such as time frame and level of analysis. It is essential to have high-quality data, which means generous, detailed data that allows for rich, "thick" descriptions (i.e., abundant contextualized details) and explanations that are important in qualitative research. How much data is needed depends on whether the data is new, unique, or rare (in which case, less data can suffice) and how broad the topic is (Tracy, 2010). It also depends on data saturation (i.e., when no new, or in reality, little relevant information or themes are observed in the data as new data is added—including new data will always add something).

Typically, when developing theories, qualitative researchers continuously confront empirical data and theories, which is called abduction or systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Ensuring that the research is rigorous can be achieved by gaining deep or long-term recollection of what happened in the field from multiple data sources, arriving at findings that improve after rounds of revisions, and making sure that all the elements of the study are aligned. Another way of improving rigor includes using multiple data sources, methods, researchers, and theoretical lenses. A rigorous study is dependable, i.e., a study that others feel they can trust, use, and replicate. This implies that care should be taken when describing the procedures, which is often lacking in qualitative research.

The third feature of excellent qualitative research is *integrity*, i.e., how the researcher handles ethical issues and preconceptions in the study. Being a professional qualitative researcher today entails much more than doing data collection and analysis; it also means doing it ethically. These days, service researchers need to follow various procedures to comply with EU-wide data protection and privacy regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In service research, qualitative researchers need to be particularly sensitive to situational and social factors and be respectful when communicating their findings. Furthermore, when reporting one's own voice and values (i.e., self-reflexivity), it is necessary to be honest and transparent about the research process.

The fourth feature of excellence is *narration*, i.e., the story of the study and how its findings are told. There are two elements of narration that matter in qualitative research: 1) discussing the research methods and 2) describing the new findings. Typically, qualitative research requires systematic information about the research process, but there are few established ways of presenting this. Similarly, there are few established ways of presenting qualitative research findings, yet the rhetoric is crucial and can be structured using three fundamental steps: (1) establish novelty, (2) provide evidence, and (3) offer an explanation

(Langley and Abdallah, 2015). The narrative of the findings should have "aesthetic merit, meaning that the text is presented in a beautiful, evocative, and artistic way" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). Some visuals, such as tables, can be used to summarize and highlight information, whereas others, such as matrices or conceptual models, are simplified representations of a concept, phenomenon, process, relationship, structure, or system. Clear and effective visuals help identify essentials, analyze the data, and communicate the results to others.

The fifth feature of excellence is *impact*, or what can be done with the findings. Going beyond mainstream research boundaries, selecting unusual contexts, and creatively adapting methods all fit well within qualitative research design and add to its impact. Even if the typical intention of qualitative research is not to generalize but to explore, describe, and explain, the patterns that it reveals can oftentimes be useful in different contexts. Thus, qualitative service researchers who have found underlying mechanisms through rigorous research could, more often than not, attempt to go beyond the scope of their studies when discussing the applicability of their findings or at least more explicitly discuss the boundaries of those findings.

Like all research, qualitative research is expected to build and extend disciplinary knowledge. It often does so through empirical insights, new conceptual understandings, or new methods that inspire unique discoveries and can be used by other researchers. Offering practical recommendations is beyond what many service researchers aim for. Considering implications for groups other than business stakeholders is also gradually becoming more common, as is considering a study's significance from a sustainability or other perspectives.

Table 1: Features of excellent qualitative research

Feature of excellent qualitative research		Method of improving qualitative service research	Additional information
Relevance (i.e., why should we care about the topic and findings of the study?)			
	Theoretical meaningfulness of the topic	• Develop counterintuitive research ideas, challenge well-accepted ideas, and question assumptions that are taken for granted (i.e., problematize to develop novel research topics or engage in "theoretical disruption"). • Use observations of situations from personal experience and topical events to trigger new issues. • Infuse ideas from other disciplines.	Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) Rosenbaum and Russell-Bennett (2019)
	Business significance of the topic	• Develop research topics together with business stakeholders (i.e., engage them in the initial project phase). • Conduct research projects together with business stakeholders (i.e., engage them during the whole research project). • Engage with business stakeholders on a continuous basis (i.e., engage with them to cross-fertilize research and practices and, for example, implement recommendations and co-write publications for research and business communities).	Aksoy et al. (2019) Jaworski (2011) Klaus (2019) Nenonen et al. (2017)
	Social value of the topic	• Develop research topics together with social stakeholders. • Conduct research projects together with social stakeholders. • Engage with social stakeholders on a continuous basis (i.e., engage with them to cross-fertilize research and practices and, for example, create policy recommendations and co-write publications).	Anderson et al. (2013) Russell-Bennett et al. (2019)
Rigor (i.e., how has the researcher made sure the study is solid?)			
	Credibility	• Apply sound theoretical constructs. • Choose methods and data that fit with the study's purpose. • Make sure the sampling matches theoretical constructs and other method designs. • Make sure the level of analysis and time span match theoretical constructs and other method designs.	Patton (1990) Saunders (2011)

	Quality data	• Use data that provides rich empirical details of specific cases or applies across a variety of cases. • Align theoretical constructs with their empirical representations. • Broaden the findings with methods outside the mainstream (e.g., adapt mainstream methods, combine methods in novel ways, or borrow method ideas from other disciplines and practices).	Gioia et al. (2013) Glaser and Strauss (2017) Gummesson (2000)
	Sound data collection and analysis processes	• Develop familiarity with the context, e.g., through prolonged engagement or on-site visits. • Triangulate data collection and analysis across data, methods, researchers, and theoretical lenses. • Strike a balance between systematic and creative analysis (cf. abduction). • Use member checks and feedback from others on preliminary analysis.	Benoit et al. (2019) Silverman (2016) Spiggle (1994)
	Study coherence	• Achieve what the study sets out to do. • Make sure there is a clear alignment between the study's purpose, research questions, theoretical constructs, method design, data, findings, and implications.	Tracy (2010)
Integrity (i.e., how has the researcher handled ethical issues and preconceptions in the study?)			
	Ethical values	• Follow norms, standards, and procedures related to the ethical research planning and conduct. • Adhere to situational and culturally specific ethics. • Observe suitable procedures for leaving the empirical scene and sharing the research.	Silverman (2016) Tracy (2010)
	Transparency	• Describe the pre-understanding of the researcher(s) and challenges with the methods used. • Use a research diary for field notes, reflections, reminders, etc.	Glaser and Strauss (2017) Malterud (2001)
	Researcher self-reflexivity	• Describe the essential subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s).	Glaser and Strauss (2017) Silverman (2016)

Narration (i.e., how are the story of the study and its findings told?)			
	Compelling method elucidation	• Systematically describe the research process, including ethical issues, from topic generation to assessment. • Be particularly thorough when describing how the data was analyzed and interpreted.	Piekkari et al. (2010)
	Effective visuals	• Visualize condensed information, e.g., methods, data, findings, conclusions, and implications. • Present core findings using efficient illustrations.	Langley and Abdallah (2015)
Impact (i.e., what can we do with the findings?)			
	Novel findings	• Emphasize the timeliness and originality of the study and its findings. • Select and examine consumer groups, types of business, contexts, situations, and topical events from outside mainstream research.	Rosenbaum and Russell-Bennett (2019)
	Transferable findings	• Consider to what and whom the findings can be relevant and discuss the limits of the findings.	Tsang (2014)
	Contribution	• Construct distinct, novel statements that augment current knowledge, and position these statements in one or more streams of research (theoretical contribution). • Develop implications for methodology and methods (methodological contribution). • Depict an empirical phenomenon in a novel way (empirical contribution).	Corley and Gioia (2011) Tracy (2010)
	Business implications	• Develop recommendations for business stakeholders.	Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005) Jaworski (2011)
	Social consequences	• Develop recommendations for groups other than business stakeholders, such as local, national, and international authorities or NGOs. • Discuss relevance from the perspectives of sustainability, responsibility, ethics, and environment.	Anderson et al. (2013) Russell-Bennett et al. (2019)

DISCUSSION

In a commentary for the *Academy of Management Review*, Whetten (1989) argues that a contribution to research is valued based on the answers to seven questions. Although intended for conceptual contributions, these questions are worth asking ourselves as authors of qualitative service research papers. The first question is "What is new?", suggesting that a manuscript needs to make a significant contribution to current thinking. This does not imply that a new theory should emerge, but that an addition to an existing theory needs to be substantial. The second question to ask is "So what?", i.e., will the manuscript likely change the practice of service management and marketing in any way? The third question—"Why so?"—suggests that the assumptions and logic of the research should fit with both theory and empirical evidence. The fourth question—"Was it well done?"—focuses on the description of the research methodology and the need to convey completeness and transparency. The fifth— "Was it done well?"—is a key question on whether the manuscript is well crafted and flows logically and smoothly. The sixth—"Why now?"—asks whether the manuscript's topic will advance current discussions, stimulate new ones, or revitalize old ones. Finally, "Who cares?" suggests that not all manuscripts will be interesting. A manuscript may be technically well put together but inherently uninteresting to the readers of a specific service journal. If we as authors can provide good answers to these seven questions, we probably have a great qualitative service manuscript in the making.

There is an emerging emphasis on ethics in both general research and service research in particular. All research has what we refer to as "ethically important moments" (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), all the more so in qualitative service research. When getting up close and personal in qualitative interviews, ethnographic studies, or action research, difficult and often subtle and unpredictable situations arise. These moments occur when informants and participants indicate discomfort with their answer or reveal some vulnerability. When

carrying out research we have been given access to personal secrets, business secrets, and sensitive business data. Traditionally, most contexts within which service research occurs have not been sensitive, but with an extra focus on sensitive contexts (such as healthcare) and research areas (such as transformative service research), research ethics become even more important. Legislation differs from country to country, but all research that handles sensitive personal data needs to follow an ethical research protocol. This paper calls for a more thorough discussion and practice of ethical service research.

Finally, this paper calls for editors, reviewers, and authors to carry out and publish more excellent service research. To advance service research, a stronger research tradition is needed where there are different types of contributions using different research methods in building a stronger theoretical foundation of service research. This suggests that we need a range of different research methods and types of studies. The balance between relevance, rigor, integrity, narration, and impact will vary between manuscripts and must be evaluated accordingly depending on the type of contribution they would make to service theory and practice. An early contribution to a specific research topic might emphasize relevance over rigor, while over time the emphasis might shift toward rigor. Service researchers now represent a mix of faculties with different competencies that together have the ability to evaluate the contribution of a manuscript based on the specific features of excellent service research within each methodological research tradition.

CONCLUSION

We surely all want to carry out excellent research that produces significant findings with theoretical and practical implications. But what can the service research community do to advance excellent qualitative service research? We provide a number of recommendations that we believe will strengthen the practice of excellent qualitative service research.

First, seek and be alert to impulses and inspiration; for example, attend academic conferences and workshops outside your field, join business and local events, and network with people from different industries and contexts. These gatherings can spur interesting novel research ideas, and, in addition, the contacts can mean access to a new empirical phenomenon, whereas the broad understanding can help develop recommendations from the study, perhaps even allowing you be part of them.

Second, choose research topics that you believe in, are passionate about, since this energy drives the kind of qualitative research you do and how you do it, and gives an extra boost to theory development. However, do not let passion blind you to empirical evidence that disregards your new findings and contribution to theory, i.e., be passionate, but not blind. The risk of confirmatory bias is real.

Third, join research teams with others who share your qualitative research values and have complementary skills. Team synergy effects can come, for example, from learning and applying new tools and software for data collection, analysis, and presentation.

Fourth, find an academic home base, a research environment whose research culture and interests align with your research priorities and career goals. Such a match will support your qualitative research. Similarly, forming a long-term research relationship or network with a research setting, such as a single company or a group of them, associations, or authorities, will be useful too and increase mutual benefit.

Fifth, interact with those to whom the findings may be relevant in different training programs and Executive MBA programs, and disseminate the findings in professional journals/magazines and through digital channels such as videos and blogs. Business stakeholders are encouraged to familiarize themselves with academics and start collaborating with researchers and research groups, working together to formulate interesting relevant questions and developing joint working practices and mutually beneficial results.

A final suggestion is keep practicing qualitative research skills and learn from others and from your experience the craft of publishing qualitative research. Share your experience in "how" to create, publish, and spread knowledge and practices of qualitative research.

Implications for others, such as those whose who design doctoral programs, could be to not only include qualitative methods as part of the doctoral training but also make sure that the prerequisites, such as qualified instructors and IT software for analyzing qualitative data, are available. Supervisors and senior faculty members have a decisive role since they can support qualitative research not only by coaching and co-authoring with doctoral students but also in other ways—they can contribute to a research environment that values all types of excellent research and support or even prioritize theory development through qualitative research. Moreover, senior faculty members can be role models themselves by sharing their experience, including doctoral students and postdocs in their research projects, and "opening doors" for them into their networks. For young researchers doing qualitative research, such opportunities to learn and network can be extra valuable.

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