

Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications

Second edition

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Preface

We have written this book for undergraduate and masters students of public relations and marketing communications, especially those undertaking dissertation research, or studying on research methods courses. Doctoral students may find this useful as an introduction to the available literature on distinctive qualitative methodologies.

Students of advertising, corporate communication, public affairs, communication management, internal communications and marketing are included within our focus. Practitioners in the field may find some of the chapters interesting for their alternative approach to the more commonly practised evaluative research with its numbers and statistics.

When writing the first edition of this text we had three aims in mind, which have continued (with only slight amendments) to motivate us when producing this second edition nine years later.

- 1 We want to help students make an informed judgement about the relevance of qualitative research to the investigation of core questions and current issues related to public relations and marketing communications. We want them to appreciate its value as an autonomous research methodology or as a complement to quantitative research in a mixed methods research design.
- 2 We wish to provide a tool that will enable students to engage effectively and critically with the practices and discourses of professional communication.
- 3 We hope to make a contribution towards raising the profile of qualitative methods within public relations and marketing communications research more generally, and to encourage those who already do qualitative research to write more transparently about their work.

We have sought to do this by offering practical guidance together with examples of empirical studies that are based on a qualitative approach, often from an interpretive or critical-interpretive stance. In places, we have presented the views of student researchers about their experiences of researching.

The idea for writing this book grew out of our experience of empirical social science as researchers and teachers. We came to the project with diverse interests which converged at the point of qualitative research theory and practice. We both

have a keen desire to demonstrate how qualitative research can be used to provide critical, innovative insights into communicative processes, the motivations and involvement of human beings, and the cultural contexts in which they are situated. These areas relate to the depth, diversity and complexity of human (and societal and organizational) relationships and meanings that are constructed through communication, aspects that are intrinsic to the study of public relations and marketing communications.

In terms of layout, the book divides the research process into five parts and is structured accordingly, although, of course, in reality data collection, analysis and writing often occur simultaneously rather than in discrete stages. Part I deals with how to get started with research. This covers the ground between coming to an awareness of the nature of qualitative research and its relevance for contemporary public relations and marketing communications, through to writing a research proposal based on qualitative methods.

Part II is concerned with the design of a research project. It begins by extending the discussion in Chapter 1 on the philosophies of research, including the implicit stance of this book, which is interpretive underpinned by social constructivism. It also offers advice on how to choose between the different and often co-existing orientations towards research, examining each in detail in the subsequent chapters on case studies, grounded theory, ethnography, discourse analysis, phenomenology, historical research and action research. It notes that each of these approaches may encompass a number of specific techniques or methods.

Part III, which discusses the data collection stage, presents a variety of methods for sampling and gathering the data.

Part IV focuses on analysing and interpreting the data and writing them up. Part V considers the mixed methods approach, which, although likely to be too difficult for novice researchers to tackle, is stimulating increasing interest from researchers in a range of disciplines. We consider the contribution of qualitative methods to this approach and note some of the debates concerning the underlying philosophies associated with the mixing of methodologies and methods.

The second edition differs from the first in the following ways. Throughout this edition, we have given greater prominence to the notions of reflexivity and transparency because of their importance within both ethical and critical frameworks. We decided not to create a separate chapter on Internet-based research on the basis that because it is now intrinsic in some way to all public relations and marketing communications research it is more appropriate to include it within relevant chapters. Therefore, alongside a discussion of how to use the Internet for communication research, we have considered issues concerning the application and ethics of new technologies, multimedia platforms and software packages for data searching and analysis, as well as disseminating information.

Feedback from student readers told us of their difficulties in making decisions about which of the different research approaches to choose in order to achieve their research goals. Therefore, Chapter 6 offers guidance in this respect. Since the first edition, the study of discourse has become a topical theme, especially in public relations; for this reason, Chapter 10 is given over to discourse analysis and

critical discourse analysis. Phenomenology also has a separate chapter because of its importance to marketing communications and growing interest by public relations scholars (Chapter 11). A new chapter covers two approaches which, although unrelated, are still nascent as research approaches in the professional communication disciplines; these are historical research and action research (Chapter 12).

Chapter 20, on mixed methods research, is new. It is self-evident that the emphasis and focus of this book are on qualitative research – particularly as an autonomous research methodology. But we are also cognisant of its value within a multiple methods research design, i.e. one that includes quantitative methods. For this reason, we note the different roles and debates associated with the use of mixed methods and the position of qualitative research as both a methodology and a method within a mixed methods approach.

In terms of the different methods of data collection, we have paid greater attention to documentary materials (Chapter 17), including written, visual and multi-media. This chapter includes a brief mention of semiotics as a method of analysing visual data. The chapter also outlines projective and elicitation techniques. In addition to the extant chapter on a generic approach to analysing qualitative data (Chapter 18), we have introduced into each of the chapters in Part II a separate section on the specific analytical techniques that are applied within the discrete research approaches.

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