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# In pursuit of relevant and rigorous qualitative research in marketing academia

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# In pursuit of relevant and rigorous qualitative research in marketing academia

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**ABSTRACT**

This commentary addresses the crucial need for rigorous and relevant qualitative research in marketing academia and offers actionable recommendations for scholars to achieve excellence in both these aspects. The recommendations are classified in four categories (1) maintaining rigour while conducting qualitative research, (2) maintaining rigour while writing the qualitative research manuscript, (3) conducting relevant qualitative research and (4) communicating the relevance of the qualitative research while writing the manuscript. The recommendations provided in this commentary have the potential to empower qualitative researchers to produce high-impact research that enhances marketing knowledge and practice. The contributions are intended to resonate with marketing academic scholars, professors, doctoral students, reviewers, and journal editors, ultimately unifying and aligning efforts to elevate the standards and impact of qualitative research in marketing.

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> … sometimes qualitative studies add to what we know from quantitative research, and sometimes it is just the reverse. Therefore, rather than rivals, qualitative studies complement quantitative research. Is it not time for recognizing the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative methods? – (Hunt, 2010, p. 283)

## Introduction and reflections

Dr Shelby Hunt is renowned for his valuable contributions in the domains of philosophy and science of marketing, marketing strategy, relationship marketing, institutionalisation of marketing, marketing management, marketing ethics, and resource-advantage theory (Donthu et al., 2023). He propounded that scientific realism provides a strong philosophical foundation for marketing research because it is coherent, critical, open, tolerant, fallible, and explicates the success of science (Hunt, 2010). Qualitative research also benefits from this realist perspective (Hunt, 1994; Maxwell, 2012).

As a doctoral student at Texas Tech University between 2009 and 2013, proposing a brand and product strategy dissertation involving qualitative data from two sources (interviews and archival data from popular press articles), I was concerned that it may raise concerns from the dissertation committee and other faculty members. However, to

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my surprise, not only my dissertation committee but other faculty members including Dr Shelby Hunt were quite supportive of it. He explained that qualitative and quantitative research are not rivals; rather they complement one another (Hunt, 1991). The research problem determines the research method (Trow, 1957, p. 33). In my opinion, we have come a long way from when the Quantitative Vs. Qualitative research debate started in marketing academia. From my experience, marketing academia is gradually becoming more accepting of qualitative research methods and publication of qualitative research papers in peer-reviewed marketing journals because, as a discipline, we understand and accept the fact that – '*Meaning and interpretation are required to attach significance to counts and classifications and these are fundamentally qualitative matters. The two approaches are then bound together, neither capturing truth alone nor trumping the other*' (Van Maanen, 2000, p. x).

Further, I learned from Dr Hunt that publishing qualitative research in top marketing journals is challenging. 'Many scholars believe good qualitative research is more difficult and time consuming to create than good quantitative research' (Rynes & Gephart, 2004, pp. 460–461). Undeniably, a major challenge for qualitative researchers 'is not to find more rigorous methods … [instead] the challenge … is to convince its practitioners that they owe it to themselves … to explicate their procedures fully' (Comaroff, 2005, p. 38) and to be transparent and nuanced about their movement from data to theory and the process of discovery (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Grodal et al., 2021). Following Dr Shelby Hunt's advice, my aim was to conduct qualitative research with rigour and relevance and then write research manuscripts exhibiting and highlighting that rigour and relevance. It took me four years of rejections, manuscript revisions guided by the useful reviews received and learning from this process to finally publish two qualitative research papers (Shah, 2017; Shah et al., 2017).

Now, after more than 10 years of research experience, I want to reflect upon those lessons and share them with current doctoral students, young marketing scholars, and scholars interested in addressing their research questions with qualitative data. The goal is to offer recommendations for conducting systematic qualitative research and present the findings and implications clearly in the form of an academic manuscript that reflects rigour and relevance.

## The role of relevance and rigor in qualitative marketing research

Relevance in marketing academia can be defined as scholarly research addressing questions that are important for marketing managers, policy makers, marketing educators and students, marketing research scholars, and/or society and environment at large (Madan et al., 2023; Madhavaram, 2024; Reibstein et al., 2009; Varadarajan, 2003). Relevant research concentrates on antecedents that these stakeholders can influence or manipulate and/or on dependent variables denoting consequents that hold significance for these stakeholders. Relevance in research is also depicted in investigating practical real world phenomena, aligning outcome variables with antecedents that these stakeholders aim to influence, the practical feasibility of implementing a theory's action implications, the ability of a theory to surpass common-sense notions used by these stakeholders, and the timely access to research findings for addressing important real-world problems (Lee, 1999; Ruback & Innes, 1988; Thomas & Tymon, 1982). Relevant research has meaningful problem-solving applications for today's key stakeholders (Zmud, 1996). Madhavaram (2024) encourages scholars to produce impactful relevant marketing research by overcoming methodological myopia, building resources for theory development, integrating subfield research, and refocusing on developing and customising concepts and theories that are specifically relevant to marketing strategy and management phenomena. Interestingly, the domain of marketing research provides abundant opportunities for research scholars to investigate research questions that hold valuable implications for all these stakeholders (Varadarajan, 2003).

Rigour is defined as robustness in the development of theory and concepts, in the design and execution of research methods, in the elucidation of findings, and the application of findings to either extend existing theory or generate new theoretical frameworks (Zmud, 1996). Marketing academia considers two evaluative parameters for research rigour, viz., conceptual rigour and methodological rigour (Shrivastava, 1987). Conceptual rigour entails the thorough examination and treatment of pertinent literature, accuracy in defining concepts, substantiating conceptual framework and hypotheses with evidence, and maintaining objectivity when considering complementary and opposing perspectives (Houston, 2019; Varadarajan, 2003). Methodological rigour involves ensuring the adequacy and strength of empirical research through considerations of apt research design, meticulous focus on measurement-related concerns, sample attributes and representativeness, as well as the use of fitting analysis methods, and precise and comprehensive reporting of findings and procedures applied to arrive at those findings, while also ensuring the reliability and validity of these empirical results (Houston, 2019; Varadarajan, 2003).

An ongoing debate in marketing academia is related to balancing rigour and relevance. Relevance is associated with the research questions whereas rigour is related to the method employed to address those research questions. According to Varadarajan (2003), p. 374), ' … discussion and debate centering on questions pertaining to relevance and rigor of scholarly research in the business disciplines dates back to at least a few decades, is ongoing, and is likely to continue well into the future'. This debate is framed as rigour vs. relevance. However, Hunt (1989, 1991) clarifies that rigour and relevance are not opposite extremes of a continuum. Marketing research should be idea-driven as well as data-driven, i.e. be relevant without giving up rigour (Sheth & Sisodia, 2006). Further, Hunt (1989) emphasises that positivism's association with quantitative methods and realism's association with qualitative methods is not logical. Both quantitative and qualitative methods can be rigorous and relevant at the same time; there does not have to be a tradeoff between the two. Research questions that hold significance in the real world without compromising rigorous theory development and empirical support are valuable to a discipline (Vermeulen, 2005).

Despite the importance of qualitative research in providing an in-depth understanding of complex and/or under-explored marketing phenomena, qualitative research manuscripts are criticised for a lack of detailed explanation of methodology and quality of findings (Santiago-Delefosse et al., 2016). Quantitative research manuscripts have widely accepted standard guidelines to present the methodology and analysis as well as reliability and validity of findings. In contrast, due to diversity of qualitative approaches, there are few standardised guidelines to help qualitative researchers conduct and present their methods and findings (for e.g. O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2016) in a systematic manner that ensures and demonstrates rigour and relevance. Interestingly, the few available guidelines are from researchers in other domains and disciplines such as health and social services, medicine, pharmacy education, and nursing. In marketing academia, based on the author's review of literature, there is only one set of detailed guidelines focusing on the rigour of qualitative research methods (Crick, 2021). These guidelines cover methodological rigour aspects; there are no guidelines to ensure conceptual rigour and relevance. Moreover, qualitative researchers can benefit from clear recommendations delineated into systematic steps to follow (1) while conducting qualitative research as well as (2) while writing the qualitative manuscript. The writing part is crucial because 'the manuscript is the delivery vehicle for scholarly research. An effective manuscript must compel the reader, present evidence in a convincing manner, proceed in a logical flow, and connect its findings back to prior literature in a way that makes its contribution clear' (Houston, 2019, p. 572). There is a need for such a comprehensive set of recommendations for qualitative researchers and reviewers of qualitative manuscripts in marketing academia. Such recommendations would not only guide researchers to conduct relevant and rigorous qualitative research and craft the manuscript in a detailed systematic manner but also guide reviewers to systematically evaluate qualitative research manuscripts. This is the very purpose of this commentary and my tribute to Dr. Hunt and his mentorship.

## Recommendations for relevant and rigorous qualitative marketing research

'Qualitative research is often criticized as biased, small-scale, anecdotal, and/or lacking rigor; however, when it is carried out properly, it is unbiased, in-depth, valid, reliable, credible, and rigorous' (Anderson, 2010, p. 2). In the context of discovery, a researcher can ensure relevance and rigour, not only while conducting the qualitative research but also while writing and presenting the qualitative research findings. In this section, I share recommendations for the same and highlight recently published well-written qualitative papers from peer-reviewed marketing journals that showcase these recommendations in various facets of conducting the qualitative research and presenting the research in a manuscript. Table 1 presents these exemplar papers and Table 2 summarises the recommendations for relevant and rigorous qualitative research to enhance the academic marketing research enterprise.

### *Relevance in qualitative marketing research*

> … Don't reread the literature. Your head is already stuffed full of that material, and you'll end up doing a small twiddle on someone else's model. Instead, he urged me to read about real-world issues – read the Financial Times, the Economist, economic history, get your juices flowing. See what seems to be an interesting issue you think you can use. – Paul Krugman's mentor Rudi Dornbusch (Manik, 2018)

This is fundamental to relevant research. A qualitative researcher can *conduct relevant research* by ensuring that the research questions hold importance for key stakeholders and help solve real-world problems. For example, in marketing academia, important stakeholders are marketing managers, consumers, policy makers, marketing educators

**Table 1.** Exemplar papers of qualitative marketing research.

| Authors (Year) | Title | Publication | Qualitative Approach | Qualitative Data Collection Methods | Manuscript Highlights |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gebhardt et al. (2006) | Creating a market orientation: A longitudinal, multifirm, grounded analysis of cultural transformation. | *Journal of Marketing* | Grounded Theory | The longitudinal-processual method using:<br>● ethnographic observation<br>● depth interviews<br>● historical documents | ● Figure 1–Research Process or Audit Trail Diagram<br>● Figure 2–A Process Model grounded in data<br>● Detailed Findings presented as a four-stage process model with supporting quotes and literature |
| Colm et al. (2020) | Dynamic governance matching in solution development | *Journal of Marketing* | Grounded Theory + Case Study | ● Dyadic semi-structured interviews<br>● Observations | ● Figure 1–Framework that emerged from the data<br>● Table 1 – Clear definitions of key terms<br>● Thorough Literature Review + Tables 2 and 3<br>● Table 4 – Summary of data collection process<br>● Table 5 – Sample description<br>● Trustworthiness of data and findings<br>● Clear findings presented in three solution development phases with supporting quotes and literature + Table 6<br>● Detailed discussion and implications supported with quotes |
| Homburg et al. (2020) | Marketing excellence: Nature, measurement, and investor valuations. | *Journal of Marketing* | Grounded Theory + Text Analysis | ● In-depth interviews<br>● Secondary textual data on firm strategies<br>● Letters to shareholders from annual reports | ● Comprehensive methodological approach, data collection, and analyses section + Figure 1 + Tables 1 and 2<br>● Clear findings with supporting quotes and literature + Figures 2 and 3 |
| Shah (2020) | Managing customer reactions to brand deletion in B2B and B2C contexts. | *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* | Phenomenology | In-depth semi structured interviews | ● Recent news headlines about the phenomenon highlights relevance<br>● Thorough literature review to identify the research gap + Table 1 |

(*Continued*)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

| Authors (Year) | Title | Publication | Qualitative Approach | Qualitative Data Collection Methods | Manuscript Highlights |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | • Detailed Method section + Table 2 sample description<br>• Trustworthiness of data and findings<br>• Clear implications of research findings + Figure 1 |
| Bajde et al. (2021) | Creating Responsible Subjects: The Role of Mediated Affective Encounters | *Journal of Consumer Research* | Case Study | • Interviews<br>• Field Observations<br>• Textual analysis of media reports | • Begins with a quote highlighting the relevance of the research topic<br>• Table 1 – Data Collection Overview<br>• Table 2 – Sample description<br>• Clear findings presented with supporting quotes and literature |
| Mimoun and Bardhi (2022) | Chronic Consumer Liminality: Being Flexible in Precarious Times | *Journal of Consumer Research* | Hermeneutic Phenomenology | • Semi-structured, long interviews<br>• Participant observation<br>• Archival analysis of news media | • Thorough Literature Review + Table 1<br>• Comprehensive method, data collection, and analysis sections + Table 2 and several appendices<br>• Clear findings presented with supporting quotes and literature + Figure 1<br>• Discussion of contributions, implications + Table 3 |
| Rippé et al. (2021) | Pandemic Pedagogy for the New Normal: Fostering Perceived Control During COVID-19 | *Journal of Marketing Education* | Mixed Methods Study 1 – Qualitative Content Analysis | • Student Reflection papers | • Relevant and Time-sensitive research question<br>• Table 1 – Literature Review<br>• Figures 1 and 3 |
| Dolbec et al. (2022) | A practice perspective on market evolution: How craft and commercial coffee firms expand practices and develop markets. | *Journal of Marketing* | Grounded Theory | • Archival Data<br>• Primary and Secondary Interviews<br>• Participant Observations | • Thorough Literature Review + Tables 1 and 2<br>• Table 3 – Data sources<br>• Clear findings presented with supporting quotes and literature + Figure 1 + Table 4<br>• Discussion and implications + Figure 4 |
| He & Zhang (2022) | Dynamic brand positioning: a firm-customer synergistic strategy of brand meaning cocreation in a hyperconnected world. | *European Journal of Marketing* | Grounded Theory + Case Study | • In-depth interviews<br>• Field Observations<br>• Internal documents such as user stories, | • Table 1 – Clear Construct definitions<br>• Thorough Literature Review + Table 2<br>• Comprehensive method, data collection, and analysis sections + Tables 3 and 4 |

(*Continued*)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

| Authors (Year) | Title | Publication | Qualitative Approach | Qualitative Data Collection Methods | Manuscript Highlights |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | user experience records, etc. …<br>● External sources such as news media articles, social media, etc. | ● Clear findings presented with supporting quotes and literature + Figure 1 |
| Scaraboto & Figueiredo (2022) | How consumer orchestration work creates value in the sharing economy. | *Journal of Marketing* | Ethnography + Netnography + Grounded Theory | ● Online participant observations<br>● Posts on Reddit, YouTube, and blogs<br>● In-person participant observations<br>● Interviews<br>● Media reports and books | ● Explanation of the research context<br>● Comprehensive method, data collection, and analysis sections + Table 1<br>● Clear findings presented with supporting quotes and literature + Figure 1 + Table 2<br>● Discussion and implications + Table 3 presenting future research directions |
| Sim et al. (2022) | Customer engagement with service providers: an empirical investigation of customer engagement dispositions. | *European Journal of Marketing* | Grounded Theory | Semi-structured in-depth interviews | ● Thorough Literature Review + Table 1<br>● Comprehensive method, data collection, and analysis sections + Tables 2 and 3<br>● Clear findings presented with supporting quotes and literature + Figure 1 |
| Wilson-Nash (2022) | Locked-in: the dangers of health service captivity and cessation for older adults and their carers during COVID-19 | *Journal of Marketing Management* | Covert Netnography | Posts and forum activity on two online communities | ● Relevant and time-sensitive research topic<br>● Discussion of ethical considerations<br>● Comprehensive method, data collection, and analysis sections + Table 1<br>● Clear findings and propositions presented with supporting quotes and literature + Figure 1 |
| Wu et al. (2022) | Consumer resource integration and service innovation in social commerce: the role of social media influencers | *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* | Case Study | ● Semi-structured interviews<br>● Documents<br>● Observations | ● Thorough Literature Review + Table 1<br>● Comprehensive method, data collection, and analysis sections + Tables 3 + 4 + 5<br>● Clear findings and propositions presented with supporting quotes and literature + Figure 1 + Table 6 |

**Table 2.** Recommendations for conducting and writing relevant and rigorous qualitative research.

| | Relevance | Rigor |
|---|---|---|
| Conducting research | • Craft research questions that are important for key stakeholders.<br>• Research timely questions addressing important real-world problems<br>• Propose a conceptual framework with:<br>○ Independent variables that the stakeholders can manipulate.<br>○ Dependent variables that hold significance for these stakeholders.<br>• Posit a theory that can surpass common-sense notions | • Examine and use pertinent literature systematically<br>• Understand the theoretical underpinnings, if any<br>• Compare and contrast complementary and disparate viewpoints objectively<br>• Choose an appropriate qualitative research design and approach<br>• Select apt data collection methods and procedures<br>• Apply fitting sampling techniques<br>• Use pertinent analysis methods<br>• Ensure triangulation by using multiple methods, multiple sources, and/or multiple researchers<br>• Ensure the trustworthiness of data and findings<br>• Corroborate the conceptual framework and propositions with evidence from data and supporting literature |
| Writing research | • State the research question clearly and explicitly in the Introduction section.<br>• Present an overview of the study context/setting and its pertinence to the key stakeholders.<br>• Explain the importance of the research questions to key stakeholders and for addressing real-world problems in the introduction section.<br>• Present a logical and detailed connection of the qualitative research questions to past literature and existing theories to identify a clear and relevant research gap in the theoretical background section.<br>• Discuss the specific theoretical and practical implications of the qualitative findings for key stakeholders along with directions for future research.<br>• Conclude emphatically with a summary of findings and contributions of the research to relevant stakeholders in the conclusion section. | • Introduce and define the key terms and concepts distinctly in the introduction and/or theoretical background sections.<br>• Report data collection and analysis procedures precisely and comprehensively in the methods section.<br>○ Explain the methodology approach chosen and its rationale<br>○ Give details of the data collection method selected and its rationale<br>○ List the criteria for selecting study participants or key informants<br>○ Present the sample description table and describe the research setting/context<br>○ Describe how the research process was conducted ethically<br>○ Elucidate the recruitment and data collection process in complete detail (e.g. could use audit trail diagram to illustrate the entire research process)<br>○ Share the interview protocol and other data collection instruments in appendices<br>○ Explicate how and when theoretical saturation was reached, and data collection was stopped<br>○ Discuss how data was recorded and transcribed<br>○ Present the data analysis technique used with the underlying rationale. |

(*Continued*)

**Table 2.** (Continued).

| Relevance | Rigor |
|---|---|
| | ○ Show how data coding (open, axial, and selective) was done with complete transparency (e.g. use tables and diagrams to show the coding).<br>○ Offer information on the software application used in the data collection and analysis process<br>○ Highlight how trustworthiness of data and findings was ascertained (e.g. using the trustworthiness criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1985))<br>● Present key findings objectively in a narrative logical storyline with evidence from data in the results or findings section.<br>○ Present the themes generated from the analysis<br>○ Examine the relationships between the themes<br>○ Use participant quotes to support the findings<br>○ Address how these findings address the research questions<br>○ Highlight unexpected and surprising findings<br>○ Use visualization tools to illustrate interesting findings<br>○ Interpret the key findings by comparing and contrasting with relevant literature in the discussion section.<br>● Integrate the findings and establish their connections with the research questions<br>● Discuss the strengths and limitations of the research in the discussion section. |

and students, marketing research scholars, and/or society and environment at large. Varadarajan (2020) lists the five areas of relevance in marketing (1) Managerial relevance, (2) Research relevance, (3) Public Policy relevance, (4) Marketing Education relevance, and (5) Consumer Welfare relevance. A relevant qualitative research would present a conceptual framework that proposes independent variables which these stakeholders can manipulate and dependent variables that hold significance for these stakeholders. Furthermore, specifically while conducting grounded theory research, the ability of the emergent theory to surpass obvious common sense notions of the key stakeholders would add relevance to the research and its findings (Thomas & Tymon, 1982). For example, Scaraboto and Figueiredo (2022) conducted a qualitative grounded theory research using netnography, ethnographic observations, and interviews. Based on this multimethod qualitative approach, they present a framework of how consumers manage their encounters and cocreate value on sharing economy platforms. Not only is the context relevant to the current times but the findings hold practical import for stakeholders like platform firms, and their consumers, in the sharing economy. The emergent framework challenges the traditional business mindset of the sharing economy platform managers and proposes that instead of stage-management of consumers' experiences, they should facilitate consumer orchestration efforts that can help overcome value cocreation challenges. The research findings also have theoretical implications and future research directions for marketing academia.

In addition to the counterintuitive and interesting findings, the timeliness of the research also matters when ascertaining the relevance of a research study. A timely research addressing important real-world problems adds immense value for its key stakeholders (Thomas & Tymon, 1982). For example, many qualitative research studies were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. One example is Wilson-Nash (2022). The author collected covert netnographic qualitative data in the form of 2,607 posts from two online healthcare communities in 2020 to understand how family caregivers coordinated the healthcare of vulnerable older adults. The findings of this research were important for family caregivers as well as for transformative service mediators like service providers, service gatekeepers, risk analysts, and consumer advocates in the context of the pandemic. The findings also had significant implications for government-led healthcare providers and policy makers. This was a timely and relevant qualitative study conducted during the pandemic. Another example of timely relevant qualitative research is Rippé et al. (2021). The aim of this research was to show that instructors can promote a perception of control in their students during the uncertain time of a pandemic. The researchers used a mixed methods design where the first study involved qualitative content analysis of reflection papers submitted by students. They found that three techniques i.e. communication, providing alternatives, and adaptability cultivated perceived control in students. The key stakeholders for whom this research held timely importance were students, instructors, instructional designers, and higher education at large.

Another approach to 'explore, identify, and define new marketing concepts in their natural habitat' (Zeithaml et al., 2020, p. 32) is the theories-in-use or TIU approach that challenges scholars to create new knowledge that is relevant to marketing practitioners. The process involves moving from data to theory (inductive, grounded theory) to achieve the goal of developing new marketing theory. Key aspects of TIU approach include (1) conceptualising new constructs, (2) developing theoretical propositions, and (3) justifying the developed propositions with logical arguments. This approach has been applied by various scholars in their research studies (e.g. Challagalla et al., 2014; Chase & Murtha, 2019; Houston et al., 2018; Macdonald et al., 2016).

Furthermore, *while presenting and writing relevant qualitative research*, the researcher should first explicitly state the research questions and then explain the importance of the research questions to key stakeholders for addressing current real-world problems. This should be done in the abstract and introduction sections of the manuscript. The researcher should also present a logical and detailed connection of the qualitative research questions to past literature and existing theories to identify a clear and relevant research gap in the theoretical background section of the manuscript. Finally, discussion of the specific theoretical and practical implications of the qualitative findings for key stakeholders is crucial to showcase the relevance of the qualitative research. For example, Shah (2020) begins her paper with recent news headlines introducing the relevance of the research question, then continues to link it with existing literature, identifies the research gap, and finally presents the method being used to address the research questions. The theoretical background ties in the existing literature with the relevance of the real-world phenomenon being investigated by identifying the research gap and its contributions to various stakeholders. Finally, theoretical and practical implications are discussed in the last section of the paper. Similarly, Dolbec et al. (2022) discusses theoretical and managerial implications (signifying the relevance of their research) for stakeholders such as research scholars in the domain of market evolution, craft specialist firms, commercial specialist firms, craft generalist firms, and commercial generalist firms. Also, Homburg et al. (2020), present key implications for research scholars in the field of marketing excellence as well as practical implications for managers and educators. Overall, these papers reflect the relevance of the research being conducted and the findings thereof.

### *Rigor in qualitative marketing research*

A qualitative researcher can ensure conceptual and methodological rigour while conducting and writing qualitative research by following a systematic and detailed approach. First, *while framing a qualitative research question*, the researcher should start with a systematic investigation and usage of pertinent literature related to the research domain. Based on this meticulous literature review, the researcher should define relevant concepts and constructs accurately, understand the theoretical underpinnings (if any), and objectively compare and contrast complementary and disparate viewpoints (Houston, 2019). All these aspects of the research conducted should then be presented in a logical and systematic manner *while writing the manuscript*. Use of diagrams and tables further enhances the understanding of these aspects about how the research question was framed. For example, Colm et al. (2020) identifies an important gap in the governance in solutions literature, presents definitions of key terms, discusses the literature on governance and governance in solutions, summarises the core studies in two tables, offers details in a web appendix, and collates all of this together to explain the rationale underlying their research questions. Similarly, Sim et al. (2022) discusses the customer engagement literature in detail, provides a summary table of engagement dispositions research, offers clear definitions, and delineates the difference between customer engagement dispositions and engagement activity. Another example of maintaining and demonstrating rigour framing qualitative research questions is seen in Dolbec et al. (2022) where they present clear definitions of key constructs and conduct a thorough literature review of differing research streams in the domain of interest as well as summarise these in a comparison table of four research streams on market evolution.

Second, *while planning and designing the research study*, a qualitative researcher should decide the appropriate qualitative research design and approach based on their research questions. Creswell and Poth (2016) discuss five qualitative approaches to inquiry viz., narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Depending on the research questions, a qualitative researcher can adopt an apt approach to inquiry and *while writing the manuscript*, describe in the methods section, the meaning of this approach, the rationale for adopting this approach, and how the approach informs the data collection methods and procedures used in the research. For example, Colm et al. (2020) and He and Zhang (2022) planned a Case Study and Grounded Theory approach to qualitative research using multiple qualitative data collection methods to investigate tensions associated with solutions development and brand meaning cocreation in a hyperconnected world respectively. Furthermore, *while writing the manuscripts*, these authors provided a logical rationale for the appropriateness of these qualitative approaches to address their respective research questions. These steps help ensure and exhibit rigour in the planning and designing stage of qualitative research.

Third, *during the data collection phase*, the researcher should identify an appropriate sample, sampling technique, and apt data collection and analysis methods. Theoretical and purposive sampling are most commonly used to address qualitative research questions. In qualitative research, sampling is not done with an aim of achieving numerical significance, rather the aim is to carefully and purposively select participants whose perspectives, informed by their experiences, can deepen our understanding of the phenomena being studied and contribute valuable meaning to the research domain (Conlon et al., 2020). The sample size is further determined by theoretical saturation, i.e. when more data would not add new insights or better descriptions for the already emerged categories from the data collected and analysed (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Therefore, a constant back and forth between data collection and data analysis is crucial for conducting rigorous qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Next, a qualitative researcher should select fitting qualitative data collection methods such as interviews, ethnographic observations, archival data, focus groups, open-ended surveys, social media or netnographic data collection techniques, and/or projective techniques, depending on the nature of the research questions. And this selection should be followed by implementation of the data collection procedures for each of these methods systematically and rigorously (e.g. Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Boyce & Neale, 2006; Krueger, 2014; Legard et al., 2003; Shultz et al., 2005). For example, Dolbec et al. (2022) set out to elucidate how ongoing institutional complexity advances market evolution using multiple methods such as archival data, primary and secondary interviews, and participant observations. In addition to the data collection method, the analysis method also plays an important role in rigorous qualitative research. To ensure rigour, a qualitative researcher should perform initial or open coding in the words of the participants, followed by the second order or axial coding to create meaningful categories, and finally condense these categories into themes or theoretical dimensions through selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Gioia et al., 2013). In the grounded theory approach, a theoretical framework and/or propositions emerge from these theoretical dimensions or themes.

Furthermore, while *writing the manuscript*, the researcher should report data collection and analysis procedures precisely and comprehensively in the methods section. For example, Gebhardt et al. (2006) used a longitudinal-processual method that included ethnographic observations, interviews, and archival data to discover how market orientation is generated in firms. They used theoretical sampling to identify a sample of six firms based on academic and practitioner recommendations, business press, and firm documents. In addition to doing this in the research process, they very clearly explained the entire research process through an audit trail diagram and a dense and detailed description of the methods used. Similarly, Colm et al. (2020), applied a grounded theory approach using the case of a firm selected by purposive sampling to investigate governance issues in solutions development. While writing the manuscript, they not only explained their method selection rationale and sampling logic in detail but also provided an in-depth description of their data collection process. Another important facet is providing details of how the analysis was conducted, how the codes, categories, and themes were generated, and how a theoretical framework emerged from this analysis. Homburg et al. (2020) did a stupendous job of explaining this in-depth (refer to Figure 1, Tables 1 and 2 in their paper). Sim et al. (2022) also illustrated their analysis process comprehensively in words and through a diagram (refer to Figure 1 in their paper).

Fourth, the researcher should ensure the trustworthiness of data and findings. In qualitative research traditional reliability and validity measures do not apply in a similar manner as in quantitative research (Locke, 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed a set of alternative ways or trustworthiness criteria to evaluate the rigour in qualitative research. These criteria include credibility (in place of the traditional measure of internal validity), transferability (in place of the traditional measure of external validity), dependability (in place of the traditional measure of reliability), and confirmability (in place of the traditional measure of objectivity). Credibility can be ensured through extended field engagement, member checks, triangulation; Transferability can be ascertained through thick descriptions of structures and processes involved in data collection and analysis; Dependability can be established through audit trail diagrams, purposive and theoretical sampling, and maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of participant data; Confirmability can be determined by thorough and systematic data management, data preparation, memos and notes taking, and data analysis (see Table 1 in Pratt et al., 2020). For example, Colm et al. (2020) conducted member checks as well as solicited feedback from two judges to re-verify the information gathered and to ensure the dependability of their findings. Shah (2020) explains in a paragraph how these four trustworthiness criteria were ensured in the qualitative research process. These steps help maintain the rigour of a qualitative research study.

Finally, the researcher should corroborate the conceptual framework and propositions with evidence from data (e.g. participant quotes if interviews/focus groups were used to collect the data or posts/comments/images if social media data was gathered) and present the findings in meaningful detail. 'Little of the methodological approach matters if you cannot present a convincing, data-driven account that prefigures the developing theory. The intent of the findings section is to narrate an informative story that is driving toward some new concept development and theoretical discovery with the careful presentation of evidence' (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 23). A qualitative researcher should objectively present their key findings starting with a brief introduction to the findings section. This section should reinforce the research questions and purpose of the research to provide context to the findings that will follow. Thereafter, a qualitative researcher should present the structure of the findings based on the themes generated from the data, chronologically if it is a longitudinal study, by stages/phases if it is a process model, the constructs and relationships in the emergent or a priori conceptual framework, and/or based on the research questions. These can be presented in a logical flow by creating sub-sections and substantiating each section with evidence from data as described above. The goal is to present the findings from the research study objectively, without much interpretation at this stage. The findings section should then end with a conclusion summarising the key findings. For example, Mimoun and Bardhi (2022) objectively present findings from the data analysed using participant quotes, media excerpts, and observation notes. They structured the findings section based on the emergent conceptual framework derived from the data. Another example is Gebhardt et al. (2006) results section that was structured based on the four-stage model that emerged from the data. Each stage had sub-sections of themes or steps supported by quotes from interviews. They also presented some findings in a tabular format (see Table 1 in their paper).

Interpretation should follow in the discussion section where key findings are summarised, interpreted, and presented by comparing and contrasting with existing literature. In this section, the researcher(s) highlights the meaning, contributions, implications, limitations, and relevance of their research. For example, Gebhardt et al. (2006), after presenting their findings, followed it up with a discussion section which summarised the key findings, introduced their emergent process model, discussed their interpretations of the key findings comparing with relevant literature, and weaved in the implications of these findings. Similarly, Bajde et al. (2021), after presenting their findings in two parts, bring everything together in their discussion section and also illustrate the findings through Figure 1 in their paper. They not only offer their interpretation of the findings by tying it with the literature but also discuss the implications and consequences of what they found.

## Discussion and implications

The unique contribution of this commentary is that it provides recommendations for qualitative researchers in four ways (1) maintaining rigour while conducting the research, (2) exhibiting that rigor while writing the manuscript, (3) ascertaining relevance of the research while conducting it, and (4) highlighting this relevance while writing the manuscript. Presenting the recommendations in this $2 \times 2$format (see Table 2) is useful for qualitative researchers and for reviewers of qualitative research manuscripts. 'An important topic that is addressed with useful data but is communicated so poorly that it frustrates readers will struggle to survive the review process' (Houston, 2019, p. 572). Thus, to enhance the qualitative research enterprise in marketing academia these recommendations help researchers ensure rigour and relevance not only while conducting their qualitative research studies but also when presenting the findings and writing the qualitative research manuscript. A higher order recommendation weaving these two phases together is that authors should first draft a manuscript outline when they are in the planning and designing stage of the research study. Thereafter, they should keep in mind the information and evidence they will need to add to the various sections of the manuscript while they are conducting each step of the research process. In this way, researchers can ensure that they do not miss out on reporting any important detail of the research process. This will ultimately enable them to craft a clear, logical, reader-friendly, and convincing manuscript.

The recommendations outlined in this commentary offer an integrative framework that will be instrumental to various stakeholders in marketing academia. For *professors* leading doctoral seminars on qualitative research methods, these recommendations will serve as a structured resource to enhance their pedagogical approach, providing a clear roadmap to students on how to conduct a qualitative research study and write a qualitative research manuscript. *Doctoral students* engaged in dissertations involving qualitative research will find these recommendations helpful in fostering a deeper understanding and navigating the complexities of conducting and writing qualitative research. The recommendations will serve as a checklist for crafting relevant and interesting research questions, articulating the methodological clarity, and facilitating the development and implementation of a robust research design. Doing so will facilitate the production of high-quality dissertation theses.

Table 3 presents a holistic structure and content of a well-crafted qualitative research manuscript. This will aid in writing and evaluating a qualitative research manuscript. *Marketing research scholars and authors* will stand to benefit significantly, gaining a nuanced understanding of best practices to conduct and articulate qualitative research effectively as well as to take a systematic approach while crafting qualitative research manuscripts, ensuring scholarly rigour and relevance. *Reviewers*, integral to the peer-review process, using these systematic set of expectations when evaluating qualitative research manuscripts, will not only be able to streamline the review process but also promote consistency and fairness in the review process, ultimately enhancing the quality of published research. *Journal editors*, tasked with the responsibility of selecting and publishing research papers, will find the guidelines useful in evaluating the quality and appropriateness of qualitative research manuscript submissions. The criteria set forth aid editors in maintaining the integrity of their journals by promoting the publication of impactful, relevant, and conceptually and methodologically rigorous qualitative research contributions.

Ultimately, the *broader marketing academic community* benefits from the adoption of such guidelines by fostering a culture of methodological and conceptual rigour and at the same time ensuring that qualitative research contributes meaningfully to marketing academia, practice, and society as a whole. This in turn enhances the discipline's overall academic reputation. Overall, the recommendations and guidelines set forth in this commentary unify and align the efforts of all stakeholders engaged in advancing the standards and impact of qualitative research in marketing academia.

**Table 3.** Structure and components of a strong qualitative research manuscript.

| Introduction |
|---|
| In the manuscript, the researcher<br>● offers an overview of the background, research questions, study setting or context, and the practical or policy-related significance.<br>● establishes a connection between the research questions and relevant issues in their domain and/or comprehension of theory.<br>● succinctly explains the alignment of the research questions with qualitative research and the existing state of knowledge pertaining to the subject.<br>**Theoretical Background/Literature Review**<br>In the manuscript, the researcher<br>● reviews recent and seminal research findings in the target domain<br>● provides a summary of both the merits and inadequacies of prior research<br>● concisely reviews/compares and contrasts alternative and relevant theoretical viewpoints<br>● identifies an important research gap in the literature and presents it as focused research question(s)<br>**Methods**<br>In the manuscript, the researcher<br>● offers ample details to inform the reader about the purpose of the study and the methods and procedures employed in conducting the research<br>● presents their research perspective and method approach<br>● informs the reader about the underlying reasoning for choosing the research method(s) and uses those methods to meet the research objectives<br>● provides a detailed account of the ways in which participants were recruited and engaged for the study including the sampling method, sample size, sample description, and theoretical saturation<br>● describes the data collection method and procedures in sufficient detail including the rationale, who collected the data, their training/background, informed consent procedure, steps in ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity, and data collection setting and timing<br>● provides detailed steps in the data analysis process and how conclusions were derived including coding steps, theme generation, interrater reliability, trustworthiness of data, and software/technologies used in this process<br>**Results or Findings**<br>In the manuscript, the researcher<br>● presents the themes generated from the analysis<br>● examines the relationships between the themes<br>● uses participant quotes to support the findings<br>● addresses how these findings address the research questions<br>● highlights unexpected and surprising findings<br>● uses visualisation tools to illustrate interesting findings<br>**Discussion**<br>In the manuscript, the researcher<br>● integrates the findings and establishes their connections with the research questions<br>● weaves in theory to interpret and support the findings<br>● explains the limitations of the research study and how future research could overcome these limitations<br>**Implications**<br>● In the manuscript, the researcher demonstrates how the results contribute to the knowledge foundations of theory, practice, and/or policy |

(*Continued*)

**Table 3.** (Continued).

| Introduction |
|---|
| **Conclusion**<br>● The researcher ends the manuscript with an emphatic and impactful conclusion<br>**Language and Grammar**<br>In the manuscript, the researcher ensures<br>● that there are no grammatical or spelling errors, that the reference style guide is followed consistently, and that the writing is comprehensible by all audiences<br>● a logical progression of ideas and thoughts through a concise and focused writing style<br>● that the title and abstract are consistent with the manuscript content and research study |

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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