

managers/scholars with all the tools they will need to address these problems and eliminate them.

I have asked two noted advertising scholars to address this debate from their perspectives. I highly respect their opinions and hope that you will find their words beneficial. Les Carlson and Arthur Kover bring a great deal of experience and credibility to our discipline, and each has served as Editor of a top advertising journal: Les served as Editor of the *Journal of Advertising* and Arthur spent a number

of years as Editor of the *Journal of Advertising Research*. Les and Arthur both approach the discussion from the standpoint of the need to expand our understanding of the nature of research. They both argue for the need for balance, and I certainly hope that you will find their words on the subject as thought-provoking as I have.

Enjoy the discussion, and by all means please share your thoughts with me. It is only in our best interests! As always, we welcome your comments at [ijoacomment@warc.com](mailto:ijoacomment@warc.com).

---

### **Qualitative vs quantitative research traditions: a needless and useless debate that hampers advertising and marketing knowledge development**

*Les Carlson*

John Ford asked that I offer commentary on a theme that may be of interest to readers of *IJA*. John seems to have a sixth sense for suggesting issues that are salient and important to me. Perhaps John was in the audience at an American Marketing Association (AMA) Conference several years ago where I served as an invited discussant for a special session on advertising topics. What transpired during this session may have led him (if indeed he was in attendance) to believe that I might be willing to offer some perspectives on this 'debate'. Irrespective of whether or not John was a witness to what occurred during this special session, he's most certainly correct in his assessment of my willingness to offer a

remark (or two) about the needlessly adversarial nature that *some* attach to these research perspectives. This is unfortunate because these views on the research process should be in harmony with each other, and by merging these traditions our understanding can be enriched beyond what might have been gained from addressing research questions from but a single approach.

At the outset of this essay, I acknowledge that there are a number of nomenclatures that have been used in lieu of 'qualitative research' and 'quantitative research', at least in terms of descriptors for research paradigms that have been adopted by advertising and marketing scholars as well as by investigators in many other disciplines. I will continue to use these two terms despite the fact that some believe that these research traditions should not be described and delineated in this particular manner (as readers will note below!).

In general, and for this essay, I will use 'qualitative' to describe research that is primarily interpretive in nature and that can include introspection. This research perspective has been utilised by many scholars, such as Beth Hirschman, Russ Belk, Ron Hill and others. 'Quantitative' means empirical research – that is, the positivistic research traditions that are characteristic of the experimental design work, structural equation modelling, etc., that has been the basis for a good portion of the advertising/marketing research perspectives and findings that have typified the latter half of the 20th century as well as into the current one. Quantitative research methods, processes and approaches for conducting research describe what many of us were trained in as graduate students in the early and mid-1980s. For this essay, I use these terms to differentiate and identify what I will be discussing later and *not* to imply or build exclusionary boundaries around what each may contribute to understanding.

The basis for this essay (as implied above) is what occurred and happened at an AMA conference I attended several years ago. I had been invited by the session organiser/chair (SOC) to serve as a discussant for three advertising-related papers that were to be presented during the session. I dutifully read the papers before the session and diligently prepared my comments for each one. When my 'turn' came in the session, I did as discussants are expected to do (i.e. I offered thoughts directed at each author or set of author(s) that I hoped might help in clarifying key points and/or extending

the research in ways that did not appear to be manifested currently in the studies and manuscripts that I had read).

After 'discussing' certain aspects of the first two papers, I began my commentary regarding the third manuscript, which had been co-authored by the SOC. In my remarks, I commended this paper because the authors had merged and integrated their qualitative and empirical (quantitative) findings, a characteristic that I had called for on several occasions such as when I served on 'Meet the Editor' panels as Editor of the *Journal of Advertising* during the mid/late 1990s.

As soon as I made what I thought was a rather innocuous remark about merging these research traditions, I noticed that the SOC (a noted and quite successful qualitative researcher) was now displaying a rather serious scowl. The SOC was clearly very unhappy with what I had just said. Not only did the SOC continue to scowl but also turned around and searched for a compatriot further back in the room while I finished my remarks. When my 'contribution' to the special session was over, the SOC quickly moved to the front of the room to address the audience. The SOC then proceeded to admonish me about several of my remarks and, in particular, to remind the audience that 'qualitative research *is* empirical'. The SOC's compatriot later located me to reiterate several points the SOC had made about the irregularities and incorrect nature of certain of my comments, especially the one where I had

apparently miscast qualitative research as being non-empirical. Remember, all this occurred after a comment from me that was intended as a *compliment* to the research that the SOC (and others) had conducted!

Oh my. Have some of us really degenerated this far in how we assess research findings (i.e. that sensitivity about nomenclatures obscures the contributions that may be inherent in our results)? Based on my experience at this special session, apparently so. I made the point about the merging of the two research perspectives in the final paper *because* this is a feature that I believe could be emphasised more in how we approach advertising and marketing research (perhaps this is true in other disciplines as well). In other words, I believe that we need more of this type of study because, ultimately, blending and borrowing from each research tradition can and does embellish that which each might contribute to overall understanding.

As noted previously in this essay, melding of research perspectives (i.e. qualitative with quantitative) is a theme that I 'promoted' in virtually every opportunity I had while serving on 'Meet the Editor' panel sessions. The genesis of this idea occurred somewhat early in my academic career when I was asked to serve at an Association of Consumer Research (ACR) Conference as a discussant for a special session on intergenerational influences. As I recall, most of the papers that I discussed in that session were qualitative in nature. While I appreciated and understood that work, I also felt that more could be gained

from the qualitative research results *if* quantitative findings taken from prior investigations were merged with the qualitative findings.

I tried to do this in my discussant remarks by reiterating the individual 'themes' that had been determined in the qualitative research and then 'reinterpreting' them based on other work that was based on quantitative investigations. I was not attempting to denigrate the qualitative themes but, rather, to enrich them by adding another layer to what these themes *might* indicate. Specifically, what I endeavoured to impart was how the 'conclusions' rendered from the qualitative research could be reinterpreted and broadened by borrowing from prior results that had been drawn from quantitative investigations. I adopted a 'what if' scenario that didn't counter the qualitative conclusions but instead showed (I hoped) how those inferences might be expanded if they were linked to quantitative findings that were already available in the literature. The result was (I hoped) a more complete depiction of intergenerational influences that might be inferred from the findings.

At this ACR session, I also noted that, early in my career as an Assistant Professor at the University of Arkansas in the mid-1980s, I had asked Bill Darden (since deceased but one of the very first structural equation modellers in marketing) how 'involvement' might be measured among consumers. Bill looked at me somewhat incredulously and said 'Why don't you just ask them?' That is, Bill Darden, who represented the epitome of virtually

everything that is germane to being a positivistic researcher, understood the importance of obtaining interpretive perspectives over two decades ago! I believed then (as I still do) that Bill was implying to me that these traditions could and should be melded together, a perspective that I then tried to follow later in my own career as an editor and as an ACR discussant.

My main point, then, is this: isn't increased understanding the ultimate goal of our research endeavours irrespective of the 'type' of research that we do? *If* that is indeed the goal to which we aspire, why waste valuable time, energy and scholarship effort on what are essentially useless endeavours at ensuring that one research tradition isn't 'taken advantage of' by another? What we need are more efforts like that of Ahuvia (1998), where a qualitative study is synthesised with quantitative data gathering. In his research, Ahuvia attempted to integrate both approaches in the research he conducted. Ahuvia's work is certainly not the only example

where qualitative and quantitative research themes and data have been merged, but it does represent what can be gained when such melding actually does take place.

In sum, and in the future, let us move beyond infighting, defensiveness and territory protection when we conduct scholarship as well as attempt to 'interpret' our research findings. The ultimate goal of what we accomplish as academics should be to increase understanding. Let us consider how broadening our perspectives on what are appropriate research approaches might ultimately lead to that goal.

#### Reference

Ahuvia, A.C. (1998) Social criticism of advertising: on the role of literary theory and the use of data. *Journal of Advertising*, 27, Spring, pp. 143–162.

Les Carlson, Nathan J. Gold Distinguished Professorship in Marketing University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

---

### Qual vs quant ... again!

*Arthur J. Kover*

Why does the qualitative vs quantitative argument still continue in advertising and marketing research? The answer is historical and theological at its core. And, as with most other theological disputes, it is not settled by fact. For example, think of the sometimes bloody consubstantiation versus transubstantiation battles in early Christendom.

Some history now: René Descartes thought that the way to understand the working of a mighty Creator was measurement; in fact, he thought that you can't really know something unless you measure it. He was a father of quantitative analysis. On the other hand, and somewhat later, Giambattista Vico thought the workings of that Creator are unknowable. The only things Vico thinks we really know are human things and probably only those with whom we have what we now call *empathy*.

Copyright of International Journal of Advertising is the property of World Advertising Research Center Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.