

Marketing Research Trends: Issues & Research Direction

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ABSTRACT

Marketing research is the systematic and objective conceptualization of a marketing problem, and the consequent collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of data and information in order to clarify the marketing problem and/or solve it. It has both theoretical and practical forms of importance, with varying trends in issues, methods and practices. This paper examines and isolates salient marketing research trend issues, proposes a research direction in business organizations, and provides relevant research, practical and societal implications.

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing is an interesting discipline, especially with regard to its scope, context, concept and strategies (Harris and He, 2020), in addition to the progressively enhanced relevance of data science in marketing theory and practice (Saura, 2020). It is both an academic and a managerial discipline which is concerned with comprehending markets (consumers and clients) of interest and achieving organizational

goals and objectives by delivering satisfaction to customers and clients (Zhang and Watson 1V, 2020). It aims to optimize societal, organizational and shareholder values (Marin and Lindgreen, 2017).

Marketing has many conceptualizations. It has been seen as exchange transactions and relationships leading to mutual satisfaction of the relevant parties involved (Osuagwu, 2008).

Organizations, including small and large organizations, use various forms of marketing strategies in order to achieve organizational efficiency and effectiveness (Sithole et al., 2018). According to Oktay (2017), the scope of marketing covers such issues as goods, services, experiences, events, persons, places, property, organizations, and profit and nonprofit organizations, among others. Also, in the era of big data, marketing has been experimenting and utilizing big data tools, techniques and methods (Bendle and Wang, 2016; Amado et al., 2018). In addition, some marketing studies of managerial interest and relevance have been undertaken by scholars, including marketing practices focusing on crisis periods. These include issues relating to shortage of goods and services, marketing management strategies during recession periods, marketing advertising practices during product-harm crisis period, and multinational corporations (MNCs) dealing with global financial crisis, among others (Crick and Crick, 2020). The context or environment of marketing is dynamic and this has spurred organizations to design appropriate strategies and practices (Gadeikiene and Banyte, 2015). In addition, complexity of marketing problems has led to diversity of research methods or approaches used in addressing the problems (Tellis et al., 1999).

It has been posited that marketing has made many transformational perceptions and conceptualizations, including moving from managerial concept to holistic marketing (Galeeva, 2015). Marketing research is one of the managerial activities of marketing. It is the systematic, objective (and sometimes subjective) conceptualization of marketing problem, and the consequent design, collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of data and information in order to clarify the marketing research problem and/or solve it (Asika and Osuagwu, 1997; Osuagwu, 2008). It is vital to an organization via its provision of useful data and information on markets, marketing environments, marketing practices and strategies, and marketing efficiency and

effectiveness measures.

Also, marketing research, partly, addresses gaps in knowledge, and comprises both marketing knowledge production and practice (Nilsson, 2020). It, generally, presents many ways of connecting relevant issues to be known, appropriate methods to be used, and the objects to be studied with regard to marketing phenomena (Nilsson, 2020b). It is a function of the need for relevant information or knowledge (Malhotra, 1996), and has many perspectives and tendencies (Brindberg and Hirshman, 1986). Any useful method can be utilized in marketing research (Addis and Podesta, 2005). Marketing research theory and practice have witnessed substantial changes over the years (Tadajewski, 2010; Botez et al., 2020). According to Hair et al (2018), marketing research methods are changing as a consequence of changes in managerial skills, innovations in technology, consumer and client behaviours, and the emergence of big data and associated data analytics methods. Therefore, marketing theorists and practitioners in the marketing research domain should keep up and adapt to these changes (Goldsmith, 2004).

Marketing managers, who practice marketing research, have been seen not to lag behind academic marketing researchers with regard to the utilization of marketing research methods in marketing decisions (Bateson and Greyser, 1982). This is, partly, as a result of the interconnections between the research need of organizational marketing decision-makers and the curiosity of academic marketing researchers (Cooper, 1983). However, relevant extant literature posits that there is a wide gap between the works of academic marketing researchers and the needs of organizational executives involved in relevant marketing decision-making (Reibstein et al., 2009; Masarova et al., 2015). Specifically, Hughes et al (2018) argue that there are concerns regarding the practical relevance of academic marketing research works, advising that academic marketing researchers should focus

more on the agenda or objectives of business organizations in their research works. Also, Oh et al (2004) posit that, although academic marketing research seems to be growing in rigour and scope, it has not met commercial needs and expectations with regard to diversity of issues investigated. In addition, Wilkie and Gardner (1974) observed the underutilization of marketing research for public policy activities.

The theoretical and practical forms of relevance of marketing research works can be realized if and when the gap between academic marketing research and commercial marketing research is bridged (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001). This is possible if, on one hand, academic marketing researchers focus on substantive marketing issues that are managerially relevant. On the other hand, organizational marketing decision-makers, including in-house marketing researchers, should be sensitive to the fact that practical marketing research should be grounded in sound theory since this helps in interpreting and integrating specific research findings with previous research works meaningfully and managerially. Marketing research methods and practices are expected to change in the future in order to accommodate the information and knowledge needs of twenty-first century marketing decision-makers (Craig and Douglas, 2001).

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper utilized relevant extant literature materials to isolate and discuss major marketing research issues and their trends over time. The use of literature review as secondary research method is noted in relevant literature (Kiralova and Malec (2021). The work of Malhotra and Peterson (2001) is used as the paper's conceptual framework because of its relevance and robustness. The marketing research issues in the conceptual framework include a redefinition of marketing research, on-going nature of marketing research practices, qualitative marketing research approach, quantitative marketing research approach, mixed methods approach, and international marketing research.

These marketing research issues are discussed and situated within relevant extant literature. The paper also suggests associated research direction, and provides implications for researchers, practitioners and society as a whole.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Marketing Research Trends

Lehman (2020) argues that there have been substantial changes regarding the ways of conducting marketing research in the last fifty years, with emphases placed on theory building and testing of models. With regard to academic /scholarly marketing research, Umer and Razi (2018) have, via narrative literature review, explored the major research trends and research approaches employed in service marketing studies, concluding that there have been preferences for survey methods, factor analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM), ANOVA (Analysis of variance), and tests of reliability and validity of research measures, in addition to increased publication interests from Europe and other parts of the world compared to North America. The most used marketing research approach, generally, is the survey method (Constantinescu, 2012), although non-traditional research approaches can be used to understand and explain marketing phenomena (McCabe et al., 2013). Tong et al (2016) explored the research methods employed by relevant researchers on the issues of walkability, concluding that the research was useful in providing empirical evidence and attributes for relevant future research works. Ethical issues have also attracted the attention of marketing researchers in relevant extant literature (Bulley et al., 2018).

According to Malhotra and Peterson (2001), some of the issues shaping the changes and trends of marketing research include a redefinition of marketing research, on-going nature of marketing research practices, qualitative marketing research approach, quantitative marketing research approach, mixed methods approach, and international marketing research. These issues are discussed in this paper.

A Redefinition of Marketing Research

In some organizations, the marketing research departments and executives have well defined functions and qualifications. For example, a typical business organization with in-company marketing department usually has some persons serving as marketing researchers. In some cases, these individuals perform staff functions (as marketing researchers) and are not involved substantially in the decision-making process where their marketing research data and insights are used. Therefore, these marketing researchers focus essentially on the generation and presentation of marketing research reports for other managers to use in making marketing management decisions. However, Malhotra and Peterson (2001) posit that the trend of marketing research is for marketing researchers to have substantial involvement in marketing management decision - making process. According to Schmalesee and Lesh (1999), effective customer satisfaction researchers in some organizations participate in relevant decisions, in addition to being assigned to be part of the team implementing organizational changes arising from customer/client satisfaction research works. Consequently, the gap between marketing researchers and marketing decision -makers is narrowed, and this will assist in reducing the problem of “marketing research myopia” which is associated with a narrow or limited definition of who is responsible for marketing research activities and decisions in an organization (Malhotra, 1992).

Marketing Research as an On-Going Activity in an Organization

In some organizations, marketing research works are undertaken as response to isolated marketing research problems. These problems may pertain to loss of sales, market share or revenue; impacts of environmental factors on marketing strategies; effectiveness of specific marketing strategies; emphases on marketing-mix elements; and determination of relevant relationships between/among marketing research variables, among others. The traditional marketing research process associated with these

problems is to define the marketing research problem, formulate relevant research design (for measurement, sampling, data collection methods, etc.), collection and analysis of secondary data, design of research instrument/questionnaire, collection and analysis of primary data, and presentation of research report (in the appropriate format) to the relevant audiences (Malhotra, 1999).

However, Malhotra and Peterson (2001) submit that contemporary trend of marketing research in business organizations is for marketing research to be part of the normal business activities of organizations, both for primary and secondary data required and used in the organizations’ business decisions. In this contemporary trend of marketing research, many marketing research issues are expected to be addressed mainly by secondary data because a lot of relevant secondary data (sometimes in form of big data with its unique characteristics of volume, variety, velocity, value and veracity) will be available in many locations, especially on the Internet. According to Abe (1997), the availability, accessibility and applications of such secondary data for marketing management decisions will be on the increase in the future. Another related issue is the creation of large marketing research databases, using a combination of customer or client exchange transaction records and secondary data available and accessible from relevant external sources. This will assist efficient and effective database marketing practices at targeted segments or personal levels (Palmquist and Ketola, 1999).

Qualitative Marketing Research

Many contemporary research approaches are based on different philosophical foundations and assumptions (McIntosh and Morse, 2015), including the positivist (quantitative), relativist (qualitative), and mixed-methods research realms. Two major strands of research perspectives are the positivist/interpretivist and post-modern/relativist. The interpretivists take the position that knowledge (including marketing knowledge) is objective while the

relativists/post-modernists take the position that knowledge is subjective, and that meaning is undecidable. There have been criticisms on the marketing discipline regarding its heavy reliance on quantitative research methods (Davis et al, 2012). Therefore, qualitative research methods are used to explore marketing phenomena of interest. Not minding the perspective emphasized in organizational marketing practices, Malhotra and Peterson (2001) submit that more integrated use of qualitative data with computer-aided analysis tools will be a dominant trend in the marketing research activities of business organizations in future. For example, responses from open-ended questions can be content-analyzed using the CATPAC software, the text responses scanned, and a neural network built based on grammatical free responses (Moore et al, 1995). Also, ATLAS/ti (SCOLARI, 2000) and Nvivo (Richards, 1999), among others, can be used for the coding of sophisticated texts/words, visual images, audio recordings, and streaming videos, among other forms of unstructured data. So, it is expected that there will be increased use of these tools for marketing research activities in the future. However, Roy et al (2015) have raised some concerns regarding the use of qualitative research, positing, for example, that sampling is difficult in qualitative research partly as a result of the existence of few guidelines about sample size saturation, in addition to the use of dissimilar sampling terminologies from different disciplines in qualitative research designs.

The trend of marketing research is oriented towards the application of human - oriented qualitative research methods (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001). This is to enable contemporary marketing researchers understand new and emerging relevant marketing issues. Marketing researchers, in general, are confronted with many critical and difficult issues pertaining to emotion, metaphor, nonverbal communication and visual imagery (Zaltman, 1997). These research issues can be handled using qualitative research methods such as ethnography (Fellman, 1999). Conceptually, ethnography involves observing

and in-depth interviewing of consumers or clients in their natural settings/environments/locations (Fellman, 1999). Generally, in all qualitative research methods, the researcher is the main instrument for data collection and analysis (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001). According to Hoeber and Shaw (2017), qualitative research methods which are frequently used include case studies, semi-structured interviews and data coding, while Constantinescu (2012) posits that focus-group discussions (FGD) and individual in-depth interviews (IDI) are the most used qualitative marketing research methods. Ethnography is also a qualitative research method that has wide applications in social and behavioral sciences (Marcen et al., 2013). Netnography is a contemporary method of qualitative research which situates ethnographic research method within cultural contexts and communities via computer technologies (Kozinets, 2010). Qualitative research methods, generally, are important in implementation research works as they assist in addressing complex research problems (Hamilton and Finley, 2020).

Quantitative Marketing Research

In contemporary times, there is huge availability of quantitative data as a result of various technological platforms and social media, among others (de Ruyter, 2018). Theoretically and practically, the most used quantitative marketing research method is survey research because it provides large volume of quantitative data which are representative, accurate and relevant, while noting its limitations of likelihood of lack of respondents' interests and uncertainty of truthfulness of respondents' responses (Constantinescu, 2012). Also, artificial intelligence (AI), 5G and allied technologies (such as blockchain, gene editing, Internet of Things (IoT) sensors, nanotechnology, etc.) are likely to have huge implications for marketing research theory and practice now and in future as they provide relevant knowledge, data and information for decision-making (Kraft et al., 2020).

In addition, there has increased use of the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in data analysis in marketing, generally, and marketing research, in particular. However, Hair et al (2012) lament that, despite the popularity of the PLS-SEM in marketing research, little attention has been paid to rigorous assessment of the its use in marketing research works. Also, there is increased use of data mining technologies in business organizations, especially in business-to-business and consumer marketing firms (Bacon, 1999). According to Malhotra and Peterson (2001), there will be increased use of data mining technologies in such marketing activities as market segmentation, market targeting, new product developments, discovering of sales opportunities, customer lifetime value (CLV) analysis, management of customers, monitoring of customer behaviour changes, and consumer satisfaction changes, among others. Data warehousing, for example, assists data mining in collecting and managing substantial and relevant data for marketing activities (Jackson and Wang, 1994). Also, some Internet server-based computers and affordable data storage technologies assist business organizations in getting relevant and substantial amount of data for their marketing operations. For example, enterprise resource planning (ERP) can assist in the documentation of customer/client history in some business-to-business marketing activities. These customer/client histories/data can be used to develop and implement efficient and effective marketing strategies in the organizations. In addition, the ERP and other cognate technologies can serve as aids for understanding relevant consumer behaviour issues, and their uses in marketing research are expected to grow in the future. This means that in future, many marketing research activities will be automated using relevant technologies for data collection and analysis. Therefore, there will be a marked shift from marketing decision support systems to marketing decision automation (Buckhin et al, 1998). Therefore, as more marketing research data become accessible, powerful tools and

techniques for quantitative analysis will be needed and relevant models will be refined. Consequently, marketing research managers will be motivated to focus on strategic and long-term issues and goals rather than tactical and short-term issues and objectives.

Mixed Methods Research

It may be necessary, however, to combine/triangulate quantitative and qualitative research methods, while noting the benefits and limitations associated with each method (Kristiansen et al., 2019). Houssemand and Meyers (2013) lament that the interconnections between quantitative and qualitative research methods are often laced with some traces of ignorance, and advise that it is not useful to create separations between the two methods of research. Mixed-methods form of research (which combines quantitative and qualitative research methods) has been conceptualized as a research approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative data, and is regarded as the third research paradigm after quantitative and qualitative research paradigms (Zoellner, 2017). However, it should be noted that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research methods is only an approximation because the two methods of research contain other different subcategories of research methods (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). The combination of methods in mixed methods research can be with regard to data collection and data analysis methods, with the research objective focusing on what one research method (quantitative or qualitative) cannot address alone (Bazely & Kemp, 2012; Brandini, 2015). Both quantitative and qualitative research methods can assist in explaining many phenomena of interest (Leppink, 2017), including marketing phenomena. Harrison and Reilly (2011), report, with empirical evidence, that marketing research is biased towards the quantitative method of research. Assessment of the marketing research problem and the complexity of the system that generates the problem can determine the use of mixed-methods marketing research approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Castelli et al., 2014).

Marketing research data include structure data and unstructured data such as images, audio, video and social media content data (Rodrigues et al., 2020). Generally, understanding of marketing phenomena, development of robust marketing theories, and efficient and effective marketing decisions are a function of the utilization of diverse marketing research methods or approaches (Dahlstrom, 2008).

International Marketing Research

In contemporary times, marketing research has taken an international stature partly as a result of market globalization, among other environmental variables. This trend is expected to continue. In practice, conducting international marketing research is more difficult and complex than engaging in domestic marketing research activities (Cavulsgil and Das, 1997). This is because many and different issues face the international marketing researcher. These issues pertain to practical marketing research considerations, legal considerations, and cultural matters of interest, among others. Therefore, the design for any international marketing research should be based on these considerations, available evidence (perhaps in form of secondary data), and ethical issues, in addition to avoiding “cultural blindness” (Cohen and Lockshin, 2017).

In international marketing research, the research design which is suitable for one country (such as the USA) may not be suitable for another country (such as Nigeria). Also, with regard to time considerations, orientations towards time vary from one country/region to another. For example, respondents’ time orientations (i.e. sensitive to timeliness) in Africa may be different from those associated with respondents from developed economies. In addition, Malhotra and Peterson (2001) posit that application of secondary data in international marketing research is likely to witness an increased growth as a result of the substantial resources (time, money, persons) associated with collecting primary data, especially in developing countries such as Nigeria.

Also, in international marketing research, measurement units are not the same across countries. For instance, in France, workers receive 13th month pay as automatic bonus; this may result in a different measurement variable when compared to other countries. In addition, the accuracy of secondary data used in international marketing research may vary from one country to another. For example, secondary data from developed countries such as Britain, USA, and Canada may be more accurate than those from Nigeria, Ghana and Togo. Such secondary data pertain to business and income statistics and population census data, among others. Although many secondary data for international marketing research activities will become more available and accessible via the Internet system, the quality of such data should be evaluated before using them (Malhotra et al, 1988). Other issues of relevance in international marketing research pertain to relevant quantitative research methods to be used; survey research methods to be used; measurement and sampling methods to be used; and relevant data collection, analysis and reporting methods to be used, among others.

In qualitative research in international marketing, findings from focus group discussions are derived not only from verbal contents but also from respondents’ nonverbal cues such as voice intonations, inflections, expressions and gestures. Also, the size of focus group participation in international marketing research may vary from one country to another. For example, seven participants in a focus group discussion can produce the highest level of interaction in Asia. In Far East or Middle East, people are reluctant to discuss their views in a group setting. In Japan, people have the impression that it is impolite to disagree with other people in the public. In all of these instances, it is advisable for the international marketing researcher to use individual depth interviews, and the generated qualitative data should be situated in the context of the relevant environmental settings (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001).

With regard to the relevant survey research methods to be used in international marketing research, their feasibility, relevance and popularity vary from one country to another. For example, in developed countries such as USA, UK and Canada, telephone is used extensively. However, in Africa, the use of telephone, mail surveys and mail panels is low. According to Malhotra and Peterson (2001), the use of Internet surveys on websites will increase in the future for both international business surveys and consumer surveys.

With regard to measurement approaches used in international marketing research, attitude scales are likely to be widely used as respondents become educated and experienced in attending to marketing research questions. Usually, from the respondents' perspective, nominal scales are the simplest to be handled while ratio scales are the most difficult. Many respondents from developed countries handle ratio and interval-scaled responses with relative ease than respondents from developing economies due to higher education and respondents sophistication levels (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001). Therefore, when measuring preferences in developing economies such as Nigeria, ordinal scales (such as binary scales: like/do not like) has been recommended (Malhotra, 1988). Therefore, the use of simple measurement scales in developing countries is likely to continue (Mullin et al., 1996).

With regard to sampling methods used in international marketing research, increased sophistication has been predicted (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001). In developing countries such as Nigeria, as a result of lack of suitable sampling frames in some cases, and the inaccessibility of some respondents, probability sampling methods may not be common in international marketing research activities (Osuagwu, 2001).

With regard to data analysis, procedures and techniques used for international marketing research activities will become more standardized (Peterson and Malhotra, 1997). Also, in respect

of research reporting in international marketing research, its preparation may be a function of the desire to prepare such reports for different organizational management audiences and in different languages (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

A Proposed Research Direction

The conceptual discussion undertaken so far has attempted to isolate relevant issues pertaining to the trend of marketing research with regard to redefinition of marketing research, the on-going nature of marketing research, qualitative marketing research, quantitative marketing research, mixed methods research, and international marketing research. This paper proposes an empirical examination of the trends of these marketing research issues, as perceived by organizational executives, in companies. Specifically, this paper proposes an empirical examination of the perceptions of relevant organizational executives regarding the trends of relevant marketing research issues. Such an empirical examination will reveal the extent to which cognate marketing research issues have been emphasize/practised, are being emphasized/practised/, and will be likely emphasized/practised in business organizations in future, including the tools used and associated marketing research challenges confronting organizations.

Generally, the field of marketing research is complex, with its practice leading theory (Constantinescu, 2012). Marketing research issues, including associated trends, constitute a fertile area for future inquiry, especially in relation to developing economies, such as Nigeria and others in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is because developing countries have different environmental context which can hinder the extrapolation of marketing concepts, theories and practices developed from matured economies (Marin and Lindgreen, 2017). Therefore, relevant future research should be undertaken to isolate marketing research trends as perceived by organizational executives in such contexts.

Such a study will help to provide theoretical and practical insights situated within relevant environmental contexts. Specifically, undertaking the proposed research, especially from the lens of countries operating in emerging economies, will help to provide beneficial theoretical and practical insights and opportunities, in addition to avenues for future research. Also, it is suggested that theoretical marketing research trends within relevant marketing domains be examined (Baron et al., 2013) because it is one of the ways of ascertaining progression in the relevant literature (Line and Runyan, 2011), understand topical issues investigated and methods used (Yoo et al, 2011), and provide theoretical and practical management implications (Roy et al, 2017).

Implications of the Paper

The insight from this paper has some implications for researchers, practitioners and society as a whole. With regard to researchers, trends of the isolated marketing research issues can be investigated in different contexts and cultures using appropriate methods of investigation.

With regard to organizational decision-makers (practitioners), the insight from this paper, including the suggested research direction, can avail marketing decision makers with knowledge of trending and contemporary marketing research issues which can assist in making data-based, scientific and efficient and effective marketing management decisions. Generally, organizational marketing decision makers applying classical and contemporary marketing research insights and approaches have a high probability of achieving efficiency and effectiveness in their marketing decisions, in addition to understanding relevant business environment (Joseph, 2020). With regard to the society as a whole, the paper provides insights, direction and methods that can be used to understand members of the society (customers, clients, and relevant audience), including their needs and wants. A proper understanding of the society via contemporary marketing research approaches/methods, including its needs and wants, will assist in improving standards of living in the society, in addition to national growth and development indices.

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