



Positivist Qualitative Methods

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Positivism

Positivism is a major paradigm of academic inquiry. A paradigm represents a basic worldview collectively held by a community. Thomas Kuhn defines the concept of paradigm as ‘universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners’ (Kuhn, 1996, p. 10). More broadly speaking, a paradigm can be viewed as a network of basic, metaphysical assumptions underlying an area of academic inquiry. Paradigms can be categorized along several key dimensions, including ontology, which addresses whether the ‘reality’ represents an objective existence external to and independent from individual cognition, or a product of individuals’ subjective consciousness; epistemology, which addresses how the world can be understood and how such knowledge can be transmitted among human beings; and methodology, which addresses whether the researcher focuses on identifying and verifying the relationships and regularities between the various elements, or analyzing individuals’ subjective experience and interpretation, of the world (e.g. Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Positivism has a long history and a critical role in the development of science. According to some, the tradition of positivism can be traced back to the time of the Renaissance. For example, Italian scientist and scholar Galileo Galilei’s (1564–1642) *Sidereus Nuncius*, or *The Starry Messenger* (1610), included using systematic astronomical observations to prove and extend the Copernican model. This work was to some extent the precursor of modern positivist science (Drake, 1978). French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was considered the founder of the doctrine of positivism and the discipline of sociology. Comte’s work proposed that society evolves through three successive stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive (Giddens, 1972). In his account of the structure of sciences, Comte emphasized data of experience as the basis of knowledge. After Comte, positivism, more broadly defined, developed through different phases pioneered by different schools in history. Examples include critical positivism pioneered by Ernst Mach (1838–1916), and the subsequent logical positivism, logical empiricism, or neo-positivism in the twentieth century embracing examples of empirical sciences in philosophy (e.g. Bunge, 1996).

In today’s sociological studies, especially those focusing on business and management, the use of the word ‘positivist’ frequently emphasizes an objectivist epistemology which seeks to ‘explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 5). Consistent with the dominant, traditional approaches in the natural sciences, such objectivist epistemology assumes that the phenomenon under investigation and the investigator have an independent relationship, where knowledge accumulates as new verified hypotheses are added to the existing stock of knowledge and falsified hypotheses eliminated (ibid). This objectivist

epistemological position usually lies on the foundation of an ontology that assumes the existence of the physical and social world to be an external reality; this reality can be apprehended through the construction of a set of time- and context-free generalizations capturing the essence of the reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Aligned with these ontological and epistemological assumptions, positivist research tends to emphasize the identification and empirical testing of hypotheses in propositional form, with quantitative approaches such as surveys and controlled experiments being the most common methods (*ibid*).

Positivism and Qualitative Research

The history of qualitative research can be traced back to the various social investigations in the nineteenth century and the subsequent development of anthropology and sociology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Today, 'qualitative research' has evolved into a vibrant and somewhat contested field, rather than a monolithic approach with clearly defined boundaries. In business and management, the term 'qualitative research' has been used by different scholars in different, and sometimes contradictory, ways. According to Van Maanen (1979, p. 520), 'the label qualitative methods has no precise meaning in any of the social sciences. It is at best an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world'. Similarly, Strauss & Corbin (1998, p. 10) refer to qualitative research as 'any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification'. Such research centers on a 'nonmathematical process of interpretation, carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme' (*ibid.*, p. 11). Overall, common to many of the definitions of qualitative research is a focus on the phenomenon in its relatively natural setting and a nonmathematical data analysis process.

The positivist paradigm and qualitative research methods may seem to contradict each other. Specifically, positivism was traditionally considered to be chiefly associated with quantitative methods, whereas qualitative research tends to be associated with more subjectivist positions of the researchers. However, the positivist paradigm and qualitative methods can coexist in harmony. In fact, positivist qualitative research represents a uniquely useful and extensively adopted genre of academic inquiry. Ontologically, positivist qualitative research assumes the existence of an objective, external reality that can be apprehended and summarized, although not readily quantified. Epistemologically, positivist qualitative research focuses on searching for, through non-statistical means, regularities and causal relationships between different elements of the reality, and summarizing identified patterns into generalized findings. Methodologically, positivist qualitative research tends to emphasize a nomothetic rather than idiographic approach; this approach utilizes systematic research protocols and techniques to develop and test theoretical models or propositions in accordance with the canons of scientific rigor (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Furthermore, when carefully combined, positivism and qualitative research form a synergistic relationship. The complementarity between the positivist stance and qualitative methods manifests itself in several ways.

First, qualitative methods expand the scope of positivist research. Qualitative research is especially suitable for exploring emerging phenomena and identifying new theory development opportunities. For example, Bourgeois & Eisenhardt (1988) examined the then rapidly emerging microcomputer industry, and identified the decision-making processes in industries with extremely high rates of technological and competitive change, which the authors termed 'high-velocity' environments. The notion of high-velocity industry has since inspired a rich stream of research (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989a; Bogner & Barr, 2000; Clark & Collins, 2002).

Second, qualitative methods extend the depth of positivist research. For example, Mintzberg's (1978) seminal work on the patterns in strategy formation distinguished between emergent and deliberate strategy. Building on the conceptualization of strategy as patterned action, Mirabeau & Maguire's (2014) publication further unpacked the process by which emergent strategy originates from autonomous strategic behavior and eventually becomes realized within organizational settings. Capitalizing on qualitative methods, this stream of research on emergent strategy offers an increasingly refined, in-depth view of strategy formation, while opening up new avenues for further examination.

Third, qualitative methods enrich the context of positivist research. Qualitative methods are especially valuable for exploring dynamic, embedded phenomena such as historical change, contextual fields, and social processes, which often cannot be adequately captured by quantitative techniques. For example, Burgelman (1994) examined the Intel Corporation's strategic business exit processes in dynamic environments. Dyer & Nobeoka (2000) investigated the Toyota Corporation's creation and management of knowledge-sharing processes with its supplier network. Both studies offer context-rich, memorable examples of critical management issues, concepts, and theoretical findings.

Finally, positivist qualitative research can be readily integrated with quantitative methods. There are different ways to combine these two approaches. For example, McNamara & Bromiley (1997) used interviews with corporate managers at a bank to explore how to empirically test a set of hypotheses, before developing a model based on the available data for further quantitative analysis. Koh et al. (2004) conducted two complementary studies, with a qualitative study identifying specific psychological contract obligations in information technology (IT) outsourcing relationships, and a quantitative study testing the impact of fulfilled obligations on IT outsourcing success.

Positivist Qualitative Research Process

In positivist qualitative research, the input of the research process typically consists of a variety of data, especially unstructured data. The sources of data include interviews, observations, videos, and documents (Patton, 2001). These different formats of data are extensively used in different fields of business and management (e.g. Gersick, 1989; Orlikowski, 2002; Kane et al., 2014). Interviews usually consist of open-ended or semi-structured questions about subjects' experience, perceptions, and knowledge. In the final publication, interviews are usually incorporated in the form of direct quotations. Observations and videos capture actions, interactions, conversations, practices, processes, and other dynamics at multiple levels,

including individual, interpersonal, group, community, organizational, interorganizational, and industry. The data are incorporated into the final publication as field notes. Documents include written records, official publications and reports, correspondence, press releases, memorabilia, artistic works, photographs, films, and videotapes. Excerpts of documents can be included in the final publication to support and explain the findings. A key benefit of utilizing the diverse forms of data is the creation of a 'thick description' capturing both detailed content and rich context of the studied phenomena (e.g. Geertz, 1973).

Positivist qualitative research in business and management emphasizes novel, relevant, testable, and empirically valid theories as output (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989b). The specific output can take different forms. The most common types include new themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and propositions (e.g. Patton, 2001). Specifically, in theoretical qualitative research, findings can consist of formal concepts and frameworks. For example, based on interviews within a large multinational corporation, Burgelman (1983) identified a process model of internal corporate venturing in major diversified firms. Leveraging 'direct research' (Mintzberg, 1979), Mintzberg & McHugh (1985) elaborated strategy formation in an 'adhocracy' and emphasized the type of 'emergent' strategies. In more applied types of qualitative research, the findings can consist of a set of substantive practices. For example, Peters & Waterman (1982) used qualitative inquiry to identify a set of patterns among the best-run companies in the US. Similarly, Covey (1990) discovered seven habits of highly effective individuals. To convert varied forms of qualitative data into high-quality findings, a number of research methodologies have been developed and adopted. The most prominent methodologies related to positivist qualitative research include grounded theory and case study.

Positivist Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory

Grounded theory represents a widely used methodology applicable across different paradigms (Walsh et al., 2015). Grounded theory was pioneered by Glaser & Strauss (1967). The principles behind grounded theory are well aligned with positivism (Bryant, 2002). The tenets of grounded theory have also provided a valuable toolkit for qualitative researchers (Holton & Walsh, 2016) and contributed to the legitimization and systemization of qualitative research methods. Before Glaser and Strauss's work, qualitative research methods mostly focused on using an explicit coding procedure to convert qualitative data into a 'crudely quantifiable form' for further testing of provisional hypotheses, or focused on generating theoretical ideas, including new concepts, properties, and hypotheses, without going through a systematic coding process. Combining prior approaches, Glaser (1965) created the constant comparative method, which achieved the twin goals of generating theory more systematically through explicit coding and supporting provisional testing of hypotheses.

Glaser & Strauss (1967, p. 106) explain 'the basic, defining rule for the constant comparative method' as, 'while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category'. Specifically, this process can be described in four stages. The first stage involves comparing incidents applicable to each category emerging from the data. Through constant

comparison, the researcher identifies each category's dimensions, conditions, consequences, and relation to other categories. The second stage centers on integrating categories and properties. As the researcher continues making sense of the data, the diverse categories and properties start to relate to one another and become a more unified whole. The third stage focuses on delimiting the theory. As the emergent theory solidifies and the list of categories becomes theoretically saturated, the researcher starts discovering the underlying uniformity in the categories and properties. This results in the formulation of the theory with a smaller set of higher-level concepts. The fourth stage presents the coded data, memos, and the theory in writing. The constant comparative method can be applied to generate both substantive theories, which address specific empirical areas of inquiry, and formal theories, which center on conceptual areas of inquiry. Constant comparison constitutes the core of the Glaserian approach of grounded theory methodology.

Strauss & Corbin's (1990) subsequent work on a different approach to grounded theory methodology prescribed a set of systematic and specific techniques for developing theory from qualitative data (*ibid.*; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These techniques center on three basic types of coding: open, axial, and selective. Open coding involves an interpretive process by which the data are broken down analytically and given conceptual labels. In open coding, events, actions, and interactions are compared with others for similarities and differences; conceptually similar events, actions, or interactions are grouped together to form categories and subcategories. Axial coding relates categories to their subcategories through the 'coding paradigm' of conditions, context, action or interaction strategies, and consequences. The hypothetical relationships proposed deductively are verified repeatedly against incoming data, while the development of categories continues as the data accumulate. Selective coding takes place in the later phases of the study. The selective coding process unifies all categories around a core category. The core category might emerge from the identified categories, or take the form of a more abstract term. The core category emerging from selective coding represents the central phenomenon of the study.

These specific and systematic coding techniques introduced by Strauss & Corbin (1990) have been extensively adopted by qualitative studies in business and management. For example, to explore how cooperation emerged in a highly competitive setting, Browning et al. (1995) conducted a grounded theory analysis of observation, interview, and archival data collected at a consortium in the semiconductor manufacturing industry. In the data analysis, the researchers first performed open coding, assigning each incident in the entire data set to an emergent open coding scheme. The resulting 130 codes were subsequently reduced into increasingly abstract categories through axial coding, which produced 24 categories. Finally, in a process of selective coding, these categories were further collapsed and renamed, yielding the 17 categories as the paper's key results. Based on these categories, the authors then identified and drew on complexity theory as a novel framework to further explain and theorize from the phenomenon (*ibid.*). As another example, Harrison & Rouse (2015) followed a three-stage process, including developing first-order concepts through open coding, discovering second-order themes through axial coding, and aggregating theoretical dimensions by iterating between data and theory. The analytical process allowed the authors to inductively build a process model explaining feedback interactions in creative projects.

Both Glaserian and Straussian approaches to grounded theory have laid the foundation of qualitative research, and some studies have drawn on elements from both. Meanwhile, these two approaches also differ significantly. The divide was evident in Glaser's (1992) criticism of the Straussian approach. Several differences are most salient. First, the Glaserian approach requires the researcher to rely on theoretical sensitivity and investigate the field without bringing precise research questions or preconceived theories. The Straussian approach, in contrast, allows the guidance of predefined research questions and preexisting theoretical frameworks. Second, the Glaserian approach emphasizes an inductive analytic process, where theories strictly emerge from the data. The Straussian approach combines elements of both inductive and deductive methods, and centers on abductive reasoning which involves continual validation. Abduction refers to 'a type of reasoning that begins by examining data and after scrutiny of these data, entertains all possible explanations for the observed data, and then forms a hypothesis to confirm or disconfirm until the researcher arrives at the most plausible interpretation of the observed data' (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 186). Third, the Glaserian approach relies on substantive coding and theoretical coding to form theoretical models. The Straussian approach has specified a coding paradigm, with the potential risk of 'forcing' categories on the data (Glaser, 1992), but can help researchers generate findings in a structured manner.

In exploring the philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory, subsequent investigations have suggested that while extensively adopted by interpretivist research, both the Glaserian and Straussian approaches, as the foundation of the grounded theory methodology, in fact, have a significant level of consistency with the positivist paradigm (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Charmaz, 2000; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). For example, the Glaserian approach builds on 'assumptions of an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data, reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems, and objectivist rendering of data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 510). The Straussian approach embeds similar assumptions, with additional emphasis on the positivism-inclined process of provisional verification of the findings. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that other aspects of the grounded theory methodology also resonate with other paradigms, especially as the grounded theory approach has also evolved over time (e.g. Annells, 1997; Bryant, 2002). For example, some argue that the Glaserian school assumes a critical realist approach, whereas the Straussian school aligns with a relativist and constructivist stance (Annells, 1997).

As grounded theory becomes increasingly adopted by researchers and adapted in different ways, Charmaz (2000; 2001; 2006; 2008) suggests that the methodology can be broadly categorized into two forms: constructivist and objectivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory is aligned with the interpretive tradition. It emphasizes the phenomena of study and views data and theoretical analysis as closely intertwined, and co-created through the interaction and interpretation of the researcher and research participants. The theory emerging from this experience is therefore an interpretation that is based on, and specific to, the researcher's view. Objectivist grounded theory is 'a form of positivist qualitative research' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 188). It views data as representing external, knowable reality and theoretical analysis as a process of careful discovery by unbiased observers. Objectivist grounded theory, therefore, emphasizes stricter adherence to the prescribed research procedures. This constructivist–objectivist dichotomy provides the clarity much needed for distinguishing different grounded theory studies. Meanwhile, a specific study

might contain elements of both approaches and whether the study can be judged to be constructivist or objectivist 'depends on the extent to which its key characteristics conform to one tradition or the other' (ibid., p. 130). Overall, grounded theory has been embraced by positivist qualitative researchers and has in part inspired the creation and systemization of related research methodologies and strategies. A prominent example is case study.

Positivist Qualitative Research and Case Study

Case study represents an important genre of social science research. The early major proponents of case study research include the works of Yin (1981a; 1981b; 1984; 2014) and Stake (1978; 1995; 2005). Yin (1984) defines case study as an overarching research strategy and outlines its defining features. Specifically, 'a case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result, relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis' (Yin, 2003, p. 13). This is consistent with Stake's (1995; 2005) definition of a case as a functioning body, a bounded system, 'not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied' (2005, p. 443), and case study as 'both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry' (2005, p. 444). Case study usually differs from the other forms of research in that it focuses on the in-depth investigation of a phenomenon in its real-world context, and is especially valuable when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are ambiguous (Yin, 2003). Case study is inclusive and pluralistic, with the potential to accommodate diverse paradigms and research techniques, both qualitative and quantitative (ibid.; Stake, 2005).

Qualitative researchers have been especially active in embracing case study, frequently citing the seminal work of Yin and Stake. Yin and Stake's approaches, meanwhile, also have significant differences. Yin's (1984; 2014) descriptions of case study tend to be oriented toward a 'realist' perspective. The meticulous and methodical guidelines provided by Yin make the work especially valuable for positivist qualitative research. According to Yin, case studies can be categorized into three types: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory; case studies can also be categorized into single or multiple cases and holistic or embedded cases. The single-case study is appropriate when the case is critical to confirming, challenging, or extending the examined theory, extreme or unusual by deviating from norms, common in everyday occurrences, revelatory of previously inaccessible phenomena, or longitudinal by investigating the same case at multiple points in time. Single-case studies encompass holistic and embedded designs. A holistic design examines the global nature of the case, whereas an embedded design investigates multiple subunits within the case. In the multiple-case study, several cases are selected to serve either as literal replications by predicting similar results, or theoretical replications by predicting contrasting results. A multiple-case study may also consist of multiple holistic or embedded cases. A special type of multiple-case study is a two-case study, with the second case serving as confirmation or contrast (ibid.).

Stake's (1978; 1995; 2005) approach to case study, in comparison, seems more consistent with the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm (e.g. Appleton, 2002; Grandy, 2010). For example, Stake's (1995) seminal text *The Art of Case Study Research* often emphasizes construction rather than discovery of knowledge and multiple perspectives about cases. Stake also categorizes case studies into three types: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Intrinsic case study focuses on understanding one particular case, with the case itself – rather than some abstract construct or generic phenomenon – representing the focus of interest. An instrumental case study, instead, is undertaken to generate insights into an issue or derive generalizable conclusions. Collective, or multiple, case study is conducted when several cases are examined jointly for the purpose of investigating a phenomenon, population, or general condition. Overall, the more 'intrinsic' the interest of inquiry is in the case, the more the study focuses on the case's idiosyncratic context, issue, and story. Stake's work differs from Yin's methodical, positivist-oriented approach, but collectively these two approaches enrich the repertoire of methods for qualitative research.

Eisenhardt (1989b) further formalized theory-building from multiple-case study research into a nine-step process. This model has incorporated elements of Yin's (1984) approach as well as grounded theory (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Specifically, first, the researcher defines the research focus and question. A priori specification of constructs is allowed, but the initial theoretical framework is tentative. Second, cases are chosen through theoretical sampling, as new cases are added to replicate previous cases, extend emergent theory, fill theoretical categories, or serve as examples of polar types. Third, research instruments and protocols are crafted based on the research question. Fourth, data collecting overlaps with analysis through the continuous creation of field notes. Fifth, within-case analysis allows the unique patterns of each case to emerge. Sixth, cross-case comparison identifies higher-level patterns. Tactics such as using categories or dimensions, conducting pairwise analysis, and dividing the data by sources, can be applied. Seventh, iterative tabulation of evidence continuously sharpens constructs and verifies relationships, yielding a theory that fits closely with data. Eighth, the emergent concepts, theory, or hypotheses are compared with the extant literature. Finally, theoretical saturation signals the closure of the iterative theory building process (ibid.). This well-defined, structured process aligns closely with the positivist paradigm, and has been extensively adopted by positivist qualitative research in business and management over the last decades (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

As an example, Brown & Eisenhardt (1997) used a multiple-case study of six firms in the computer industry to examine how organizations can successfully engage in continuous change. Specifically, the authors first positioned the study in the theoretical literature on organizational change, which focused on the punctuated equilibrium model and radical change. Having identified the important but understudied continuous, incremental change as the research focus, the authors selected six computer firms, using each firm as a replication to confirm or disconfirm emerging conceptual insights. The authors visited the firms and conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with both lower- and higher-level managers regarding the evolution of product development projects. Using the interviews as well as supplementary data, the authors wrote an independent case study for each firm, with a focus on the features of multiple-product innovation. Through subsequent comparison of different permutations of pairs of cases for similarities and differences, a set of

organizational structures and processes related to continuous change emerged. The author crystallized the findings into three key properties: 'semisttructures', 'links in time', and 'sequenced steps', and finally linked the ideas to existing literatures, including complexity theory and the resource-based view of the firm, to make further theoretical contributions (ibid.). This study uses a methodical approach to search for the 'objective', generalizable best practices, and demonstrates a clear positivist orientation. Other examples following this approach include the studies of Hallen & Eisenhardt (2012), Davis & Eisenhardt (2013), and Su (2013).

Positivist Qualitative Research in Diverse Disciplines

Positivist qualitative studies have been adopted by many disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, policy, law, health, education, and business. In business, positivist qualitative research has been applied in many major fields, including, but not limited to, management, information systems, international business, organizational behavior, marketing, accounting, and operations. In management, qualitative research, with both positivist and non-positivist stances, has been extensively applied (Lee, 1991; Bansal & Corley, 2011). Similarly, in information systems, there is a plurality of qualitative research approaches, both positivist and non-positivist (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Mingers, 2001; Dubé & Paré, 2003). The field of international business also moves toward methodological pluralism by embracing diverse approaches, including both positivist and 'alternative' qualitative research (Welch et al., 2011). In organizational behavior, qualitative research has long had an important place (Johns, 2006). The field of marketing has long embraced qualitative methods as well (Calder, 1977; Belk, 2007), although qualitative research tends to be associated with an interpretivist approach in marketing. In the field of accounting, similarly, qualitative research in general has a long tradition (Chua, 1986; Vaivio, 2008). In operations management, there has been an increasing use of qualitative research (Barratt et al., 2011). Many of the qualitative studies in the field of operations management adopt a positivist stance.

While the prevalence of positivist qualitative research varies with specific disciplines and publication outlets, the approach has established its position as a key genre of publication. The following are some examples of empirical research leveraging positivist qualitative methods. Positivist qualitative research regularly appears in the *Academy of Management Journal* (e.g. Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (e.g. Lawrence & Dover, 2015), *Organization Science* (e.g. Cattani et al., 2013), the *Strategic Management Journal* (e.g. Joseph & Ocasio, 2012), the *Journal of International Business Studies* (e.g. Orr & Scott, 2008), *MIS Quarterly* (e.g. Levina & Ross, 2003), and *Information Systems Research* (e.g. Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998).

Since positivist qualitative research shares the same philosophical stance as many quantitative studies, journals with a quantitative focus have also featured positivist qualitative studies, complementing quantitative research. Examples of these outlets include *Management Science* (e.g. Faraj & Xiao, 2006), *Production and Operations Management* (e.g. Pagell et al., 2014), the *Journal of Operations Management* (e.g. Choi & Hong, 2002), and *Decision Sciences* (e.g. Levina & Su, 2008). In addition, positivist qualitative research is

especially valuable for identifying and illustrating ‘best practices’ from multiple business cases. This approach has therefore been extensively applied in publications in practitioner-oriented journals, such as the *Harvard Business Review* (e.g. Lacity et al., 1995) and the *MIT Sloan Management Review* (e.g. Su et al., 2016).

Across these disciplines, positivist qualitative research has provided a useful toolkit for studying a wide range of phenomena. These phenomena encompass multiple levels, from microfoundations to macro dynamics, spanning the levels of individual, group, organizational subunit, organization, and interorganizational network (Hitt et al., 2007). For example, at the individual level, Molinsky (2013) used self-reflections of 50 students to understand the psychological mechanisms by which individuals adapt to new cultural settings. At the organizational level, Su (2013) used 95 interviews with middle- and senior-level managers, direct observations, and archival data at 13 offshore IT service suppliers – which encompassed all the most globally recognized players in China's IT outsourcing industry – to examine how these organizations grow their business in multiple markets and make decisions regarding their internationalization. At the interorganizational level, Dyer & Nobeoka (2000) combined interviews with more than 30 executives from Toyota; interviews with executives from 10 of Toyota's first-tier suppliers in Japan and 11 Toyota suppliers in the US; and archival and survey data to examine how the company creates and manages a high-performance, knowledge-sharing production network. All these studies have both offered rich depictions of complex, contemporary phenomena and made significant, novel contributions to theories.

Positivist Qualitative Research in the Age of Digitization and Globalization

Positivist qualitative research has unique value propositions in today's business environment. Our world is being transformed by two major trends: digitization and globalization (Manyika et al., 2011, 2014). The emergence of information and communications technologies is changing the foundation and fabric of economies and societies, giving rise to new forms of organizing (e.g. Boudreau & Lakhani, 2013; Kuek et al., 2015; Lifshitz-Assaf, forthcoming), while disrupting incumbent ones. A variety of innovative digital technologies, such as the mobile Internet (e.g. Ghose et al., 2013), cloud computing (e.g. Su, 2011), big data (e.g. Tambe, 2014) and analytics (e.g. Martens et al., 2016), 3D printing (e.g. Su & Pirani, 2013), search engine (e.g. Ghose et al. 2014), online recommendation systems (e.g. Panniello et al., 2016), and artificial intelligence (e.g. Dhar, 2016), are shaping the world's informational, economic, and social relationships (e.g. El Sawy et al., 2010; Sundararajan et al., 2013; Dhar et al., 2014) and giving rise to new industries and market categories.

Simultaneously, digitization accelerates globalization (e.g. Agerfalk & Fitzgerald, 2008; Chen & Horton, 2016; Aral et al., 2017). The global flow of capital, trade, and increasingly, information, ideas, and innovation, has shifted the world's business landscape (Manyika et al., 2014). Emerging markets have grown into not only new hubs of global commerce in terms of scale, but also worldwide centers of innovation and entrepreneurship (e.g. *The Economist*, 2015). Emerging market-based organizations, and their underlying

socioeconomic ecosystems, are largely new and can differ significantly from traditional ones. For example, research has shown that in emerging markets, individuals' sensemaking and organizations' strategic decision-making can be especially dynamic and innovative (Su, 2015). The convergence of digitization and globalization leads to increasing innovation and interaction, thereby presenting new opportunities and a compelling need for further academic inquiry.

In this rapidly changing environment, positivist qualitative research can be an especially valuable tool for advancing academic theories, for several reasons. First, qualitative research is suitable for investigating the emergent, ambiguous, dynamic, and less-understood phenomena brought about by digitization and globalization. In this environment, the flexible, contextualized characteristics of qualitative inquiry have an advantage over quantitative methods because qualitative research is 'open to unanticipated events' and 'offers holistic depictions of realities' (Rynes & Gephart, 2004, p. 455) that encompass a wide range of variables, relationships, meanings, and processes.

Second, positivist qualitative research, particularly, can help motivate researchers with a positivist stance to explore these emerging phenomena. Positivist researchers represent a large academic community. Some disciplines, such as finance and operations, or topics, such as big data and analytics research, mostly adopt a positivist paradigm. A positivist stance can help engage a dialogue with a diverse set of communities. Positivist qualitative research can also be readily combined with quantitative methods. For example, the theoretical concepts, relationships, and frameworks that emerge from positivist qualitative research can be further examined with quantitative methods. Such integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches can enrich our understanding of diverse phenomena.

Third, the positivist paradigm accepts the notion of the 'generalizability' of findings. When studying the emerging phenomena in digitization and globalization, researchers are able, therefore, to examine whether these new phenomena can generate new theories, whether the new theories can help reconceptualize existing phenomena, whether the new phenomena can in fact be understood by existing theories, and whether the new phenomena are qualitatively different from existing ones. These questions can meaningfully contribute to the creation and accumulation of knowledge.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, the trends of digitization and globalization give rise to new opportunities and challenges. The increasing availability of data, combined with the innovative application of analytic techniques such as data mining, can potentially complement or even extend traditional positivist qualitative methods. Data in different languages and from diverse cultural contexts could also become a rich source of information and inspiration for theory development.

Overall, embracing a plurality of philosophical perspectives and research methods allows scholars to examine the changing landscape of global business from diverse frames of reference. Positivist qualitative research, with its significant tradition and extensive adoption in diverse disciplines, provides an important toolkit for understanding today's ever-changing economy and society.

Conclusion

Positivist qualitative research represents an important, established genre of academic inquiry. Ontologically, it assumes an objective external reality that is apprehensible although not readily quantifiable. Epistemologically, it focuses on identifying regularities, relationships, patterns, and generalizable findings from this reality. Methodologically, it emphasizes the application of systematic protocols and techniques to develop and test theoretical models or propositions based on the canons of scientific rigor. When carefully designed and meticulously executed, positivist qualitative research can synergistically combine the strengths of positivist paradigm and qualitative inquiry. Based on diverse forms of data, positivist qualitative research generates novel and reliable concepts and theories regarding complex and oftentimes contemporary phenomena. Grounded theory is a widely used methodology for positivist qualitative research, while case study prescribes methodical procedures that are especially useful for generating positivist theoretical insights from qualitative data. Diverse disciplines have embraced positivist qualitative research.

Positivist qualitative research has its challenges. Due to its oftentimes field-based nature and highly methodical research process, it can require significant time and commitment, as well as access to research sites for in-depth investigation. Demonstration of rigor by following the prescribed procedures and guidelines is important (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Dubé & Paré, 2003; Siggelkow, 2007; Gibbert et al., 2008; Yin, 2014). Meanwhile, however, a key merit of positivist qualitative research, as well as qualitative inquiry in general, is the celebration of novelty and creativity (Bansal & Corley, 2011). Therefore, researchers should also actively explore different styles within positivist qualitative research and pursue methodological innovation. When applying positivist qualitative methods, researchers need to maintain a fine balance between rigor and creativity, and seek to generate insights that are both empirically valid and theoretically ground-breaking. Today's age of digitization and globalization can represent an excellent opportunity for applying and advancing positivist qualitative research.

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