Critical thinking into re-interviewing in small business and entrepreneurship research

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Abstract

Over the past decade, qualitative research has been the chosen method used in exploratory research designs. The main advantages of qualitative research include gaining preliminary insights into a research problem, and also the meaning of research questions. If we search "re-interview" (gathering qualitative data) on Google scholar, most of the studies presented are related to the subjects of medical science. Very little of management research has associated the re-interviewing. The aim of this study is to discuss the importance of re-interviewing in management research. A case study was discussed in order to analyse the necessity of re-interviewing in small business management. A special-purpose re-interview survey can address specific survey concerns more specifically.

The subject of social reputation from owner-managers' points of view was explored in this study. According to the results of re-interviewed, owner-managers of small Chinese restaurants in Taiwan, they cannot be described as 'ethical'. They are typically walking on the edge of the law. The motivation for this study stemmed from the different notions or descriptions of social reputation that were given by owner-managers of small Chinese restaurants, specifically between the two interviews (interviews and re-interviews) that were conducted with each of them. A major contribution of this study is that owner-manages may have different opinions about social reputation once they become aware of their customers' points of view. Hence they may overturn their prior descriptions. Therefore, this study suggests that re-interviewing may be a critical research procedure in management studies, especially in the area of small business management. A re-interview can not only ensure the quality of quantitative data, but may also help researchers to understand the true notions rooted in owner-managers' minds.

1. Introduction

Small businesses are a large part of the economy. However, the importance of research to small business is often underestimated, because they are complex and offer an immense range of topics to investigate (Curran and Blackburn, 2001; Storey, 1994). On the other hand, small enterprise is unlikely to have a complex organisational structure and is more transparent than that of large companies (Curran and Blackburn, 2001). Nevertheless, "small does not mean simple. Smaller enterprises are actually more difficult to study than large enterprises. Where activities lack clear structures and recording procedures, measurement is much more difficult and propositions more difficult to test" (Curran and Blackburn, 2001, p.5).

This study therefore consists of three parts. These are, firstly, a brief review of the nature and characteristics of both quantitative and qualitative research. Secondly, this study will critique the advantages and disadvantages of both research methods. Thirdly, a critical thinking of the "re-interview" will be provided by this study. Finally, a discussion and several suggestions are also included.

2. Literature review

The quantitative research where the emphasis is on a large amount of data collection and testing the relationship between the theory and people's behaviour, a qualitative study is more interested in the meaning of behaviour by the process of the research (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

Unlike a deductive approach of quantitative research which accentuates in the collection and analysis of data to test the relationship between theory and research, a qualitative research study usually places emphasis on words rather than quantification. This provides inductive, interpretive, or constructive ways to interpret the relationships between theory and research (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

Ideally research steps should adopt qualitative methods to explore research problems, especially for a focused group interview. Over the past decade, qualitative research has been the selected research method used in exploratory research designs (Hair, Bush and Ortinau, 2006). Data from qualitative research is produced from broad answers given to specific questions in in-depth interviewing; from responses to open-ended questions in a questionnaire; through observation; film and video; archival data; case study and so on. Zaltman, LeMasters and Heffring (1982) also suggest using a 'type-in-use' approach, working beside managers, to study and observe their activities.

In the first instance, this study has to notice that small business management is most commonly linked entrepreneurship (Stokes and Wilson, 2002). For small firms

and entrepreneurship research, Curran and Blackburn (2001, p.79) indicate "the most common field strategy in small business is the interview, particularly face-to-face interview". Davidsson (2005, p.59) also argues that "entrepreneurship research requires both 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' approaches. However, there has to be a proper match between the research question and the chosen approach". In fact, qualitative research method was mostly used in previous small business management research and entrepreneurship studies. "One of the main objectives of qualitative research is to gain preliminary insights into research problem" (Hair, Bush and Ortinau, 2006, p.173). Silverman (2001) emphasises that the greatest strength of qualitative research is its ability to analyse what actually happens in a naturally occurring setting, while quantitative research will often turn this phenomenon into a box. Crespi (1977, p.285) also indicates "there are still many to whom attitudinal data are more interesting than meaningful". This is a criticism but it can assist researchers in accurately recording behaviour rather than just reporting results.

Bryman and Bell (2007) attempt to draw out the chief contrasting features between quantitative and qualitative research. Compared with quantitative research, some contrasts can also be seen as the advantages of qualitative research. For example:

1. Qualitative research concerns the words, the process of the research, and the point of view of participants. This allows researchers to gain an insight into the meaning of research questions. While quantitative researchers are more interested in numbers and are thus concerned with the results of quantitative analysis.

2. Quantitative research typically collects the data to test the theory and concepts, whereas in qualitative research concepts and theoretical elaboration emerge from data collection.

3. Whereas an unambiguous and reliable data is provided by quantitative research through the precision offered by measurement, rich and deep data may be depicted by the process of qualitative research. A qualitative researcher investigates people in a natural environment or social reality.

4. It is widely accepted that the quantitative researcher is concerned with people's behaviour, while a qualitative researcher is investigating the meaning of action.

According to these five areas of contrast, it would be very difficult to state which method is better than the other. Even so, the main advantage of a qualitative survey for research is not only the richness of the data, but also in providing the researcher with an opportunity to gain an insight into the subject's behaviour; such as emotion, attitude,

and owner-managers' practical behaviours in their restaurants. Barbour (2008, p.13) concludes that "qualitative method can allow us to access these 'embedded' process by focusing on the context of people's everyday". Although there are many advantages of conducting qualitative interviews, one critical problem of them is that the interviewees may not tell the interviewer what their real thoughts are, especially in regard to ethical issues. Cpoe (2003, p.429) also indicates that "entrepreneurship represents a special and unique context in which to study management learning", and needs more learning from discontinuous events. Consequently, an example was provided by the study in order to discuss this critical problem.

3. Discussions

In order to ascertain and be able to describe the characteristics of interest in a situation (Sekaran, 2003), a case study was used in this study. "A case study involves in-depth, contextual analysis of similar situation in an organization, where the nature and definition of the problem happen to be the same as experienced in the current situation (Sekaran, 2003, p.35). Hence, a case study (A) about the differences between interview and re-interview goes into details below.

Case (A)

A reputation management research about social reputation in small Chinese restaurant in southern Taiwan was conducted by Lu (2010). In order to compare the different points of view on social reputation from both customers and owner-managers of Chinese restaurants, a quantitative questionnaire for customers and personal interviews with owner-managers were used by the study. Both qualitative research and quantitative data collection were undertaken in the same period, June and August 2007. As a result, 30 semi-structured interviews with owner-managers in Southern Taiwan, this included Chinese restaurants and snack bars (but not luxury 4 or 5 star hotel restaurants). At the same time 648 quantitative research questionnaires were answered by customers.

Interview, June and August 2007

One of the questions was "Establishing reputation for social responsibility". Twenty five of owner-managers agree that social responsibility can improve their reputation; however, profit is more important than social reputation.

It is widely believed that the main or only target of business behaviour is making money. Thus, when discussing the topic of establishing a reputation for social responsibility and whether profit is more important than social reputation, the interviewees always had to think hard about it. They all agreed that nowadays

environmental consciousness (eco-awareness) is on the rise and there is an obligation to do some pollution prevention. The Bureau of Environmental Protection of local government checks their waste management, food waste recycling, management of sewage systems, and waste water and so on, in some cases regularly and in others occasionally. Hence, this was not unexpected that most owner-managers know and understand the importance of social reputation. However this must be based on profit.

The result of quantitative research

The gender distribution of the sample was almost equal, with 49.4% males and female and 50.6% females. This age distribution was from 18 to 65 years old.

Social reputation in this study was principally focused on social responsibility. There were five questions which address the various forms of ethical behaviour including (1) recycling, (2) fair treatment of employees, (3) provision of a healthy work place, (4) paying tax on time, and (5) social responsibility. They may be the most important matters for respondents' choice of restaurant. The Social responsibility scale (SRS) is a latent variable obtained from Principal Components Analysis and consisting of five customers' assessment of ethical behaviours. Hence, the study defines the Social responsibility scale (SRS) as an independent variable and then investigates a bivariate correlation with the dependent variable, Customers' choice of restaurant which relies on own experience. According to the result, we find positive and significant correlations between SRS and the dependent variables, but very weak Cohen (1988), $r = 0.21$. However, the variable was not presented as significant factors in the regression model, $B = 0.053$ and t-statistic $= 1.341$.

Re-interview, Jan 2010

In order to ensure the quality of quantitative data, that study adopted a re-interview program for the results of the quantitative research survey (Paben, 1998). The object of using key findings of the quantitative research was to understand whether the owner-managers of small Chinese restaurant agreed with the results of the quantitative analysis. A special-purpose re-interview survey (gathering qualitative data) can address specific survey concerns more specifically (Hanuschak *et al.*, 1991). Therefore, following the results of the quantitative analysis, we re-interviewed eight owner-managers who had previously been interviewed in 2007; and a brief presentation was given to show the results of the quantitative analysis to the owner-managers. The aim of this re-interview was to identify whether the owner-managers agreed with the results of the quantitative research. Hence, this study gained a deeper insight into the findings of the quantitative data.

Accordingly, a question was emerged from the result of quantitative research and

re-interviewed the owner-managers, as "When customers select a restaurant they do not consider the social responsibility".

One owner-manager said: "*No, they will not consider social responsibility, because they are just looking for a restaurant, not for a restaurant in a five-star hotel. Customers may also agree we are running a restaurant just for life or economic pleasure, they do not think too much about social responsibility issues*".

One owner-manager said: "*I do not think customers will think about the social responsibility of a small restaurant. In my opinion, the social responsibilities of small restaurants are providing fresh food. Otherwise, do not cheat customers, for example, price and source of the ingredients. Of course, we have to follow the related law; for example, to prevent any pollution happening in my restaurant and not be fined*".

One owner-manager (male, aged 39) said: "*Actually, I agree that when customers select a restaurant, they do not consider the social responsibility of the restaurants.*

Generally speaking, owner-managers agreed that when customers select a restaurant, they do not consider the social responsibility of the restaurant. According to the results of re-interviewed, owner-managers of small Chinese restaurants in Taiwan, they cannot be described as 'ethical'. They are typically walking on the edge of the law.

Although this result is similar to that of the quantitative research, this was unexpected by the study, due to the results of the interviews that were conducted in 2007. As shown above, twenty five of the owner-managers agreed that social responsibility can improve their reputation. This study therefore suggests that re-interview might be the best way to understand the variation between owner-managers and their customers in small business management research. That is because of some of the behavioural characteristics of small business are,

1. The struggle to raise finance (Burns, 2007).
2. Mixed educational background, possibly no HE (higher education), limited access to exec development activity. (Stokes and Wilson, 2002 and Bolton Committee, 1971).
3. Although owner-managers of small firms may desire to grow their businesses, they may lack competencies or capacity for changing processes.

The above three characteristics of small business may lead to the bahaviours of cost concern and have no ideas about the social reputation. In addition, the owner-managers of small firms may not understand the formal procedures for marketing their businesses due to the generally lower academic achievement.

4. Conclusion and suggestions

It was surprising for the study that not only customers, but also owner-managers when re-interviewed, agreed that social responsibility or social reputation is not an important factor for a restaurant. It was interesting to note that in the first interviews carried out in 2007, all owner-managers accepted that environmental consciousness (eco-awareness) was on the rise and most of them also agreed that social responsibility is a very important factor for a restaurant. Unexpectedly, they agreed with the results of the quantitative research conducted for the study that social responsibility, or social reputation, is not a factor when customers are selecting a restaurant. This also reflects that entrepreneurs are in some cases, "crucial in saving the viability of their businesses" (Gray, 2007, p.15).

Whether or not a contradiction is presented in this topic, owner-managers are genuinely understanding about protecting the environment and self-respecting themselves. They do care about social responsibility even though they agreed it is not an important factor when customers select a restaurant. On the other hand, they may say one thing but do another; or exaggerate on how much social responsibility they actually perform. This may be because they are afraid that the cost of social responsibility will erode their financial performance. For owner-managers of small restaurants, the only way to achieve social responsibility may be not to be found out and face being fined. An inference can be derived that a re-interview truly reflects the nature of qualitative research, as it brings an insight into the real world.

Finally, this study suggests that re-interviewing can be seen as a very good and appropriate method to discuss the difference between owner-managers and customers, or amongst owner-managers of restaurants. The re-interview should be critically considered as a main point for further small business management research.

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