

# THE VITALITY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE ERA OF BLOGS AND TWEETING

## AN ANATOMY OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH METHODS

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### INTRODUCTION

The research landscape has never been richer in techniques and technology, nor has there been such a bewildering choice of methods in the history of Consumer Research.

For most of the past 50 years or so, the debate about alternative methods has centred largely on a choice between Qualitative Research (with its Focus Groups, Individual interviews, Co-creation sessions) and Quantitative surveys (and their sophisticated, multivariate or regression techniques for analysing data). This sometimes gave rise to fierce debates about their legitimacy, validity, depth and their respective pros and cons (e.g. Cooper and Branthwaite, 1977; Cooper and Patterson, 2008).

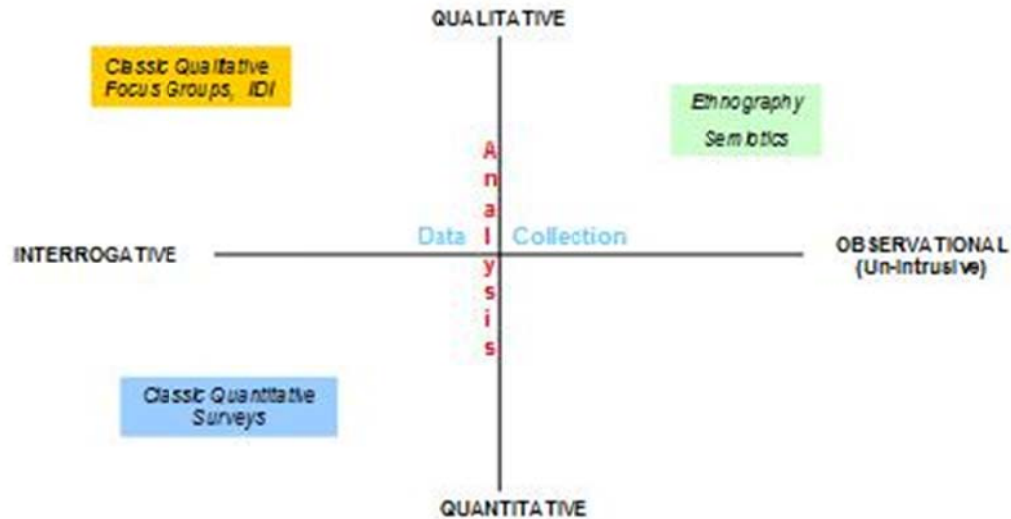
Within these broad categories, many variants have emerged in techniques and the sources of data:

- Extended qualitative groups and the inclusion of elicitation and projective techniques
- Telephone interviewing as well as face-to-face
- More sophisticated ways of asking questions and better statistical tools for analysis
- Semiotics, which took a different positioning using qualitative methods to analyse written media communications from advertisers, social commentators etc.
- Observational approaches including Ethnography
- Use of the internet as the medium for interviewing

Each of these methods has strengths and limitations – there is no ‘perfect’ research methodology – and each has its champions. Moreover, the proliferation of variations on these methods by different Agencies has turned them into ‘fashion accessories’ with their own branding, catchy names, etc.

It is important in evaluating these alternative research methods to understand the underlying similarities and differences, and the trade-off in methodological rigour and benefits (see figure 1a).

FIGURE 1A  
RESEARCH METHODS – UNDERLYING CHARACTERISTICS



**ENTER SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING (SMM)**

An alternative approach to market and consumer research that is attracting considerable attention, and involves less direct interaction with market researchers, is through text-analytics which search the content of social network sites and blogs to monitor references to brands and products.

This interest in Social Media Monitoring has been widely voiced in marketing research journals and magazines, as well as online. Goffman (2009) contrasted the use of panels in quantitative online research with the freedom of spontaneous expression on Facebook, where he believes people are transparent in using their real names, and talk openly about their personal feelings, thoughts, preferences, expectations and fears.

A vision of the future for research is put forward by Will Goodhand (2010) using DigiViduals to trawl the internet and capture what is being said about products and services. DigiViduals track what is going on in the exchange of Tweets, and morph themselves into synthesised characters.

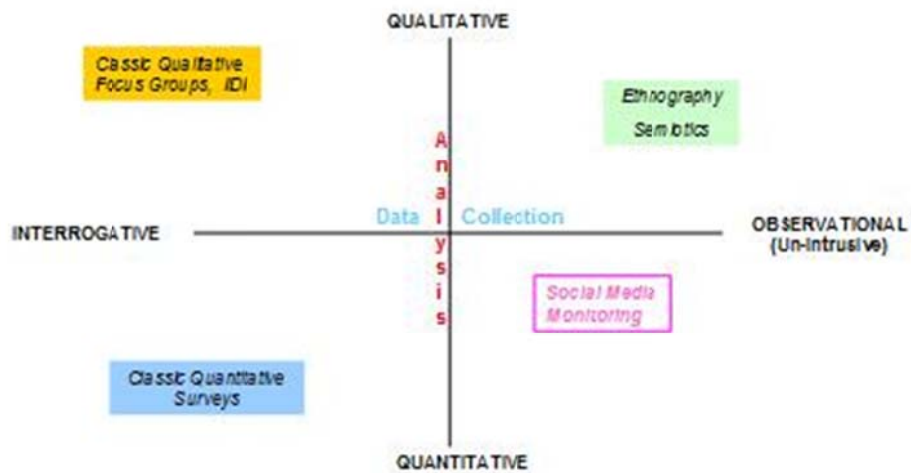
Niels Schillewaert (2010) argues that it makes sense to tap social networking sources to find out more about consumers and their evaluations of current products, than subjecting them to questionnaires and formal market research. He foresees social network sites dedicated to consumer research, where voluntary participants “will generate a continuous flux of insights” stimulated by researchers as well as self-generated by the consumer. By befriending these visitors, they will create their own consumer panels and a continuous stream of feedback, ideas and lifestyle insights. While these may not be statistically representative, he suggests the very size of the data base creates its own validity. In this open and collaborative alliance with consumers, he does not comment on the potential for minority groups of consumers with their own particular agenda, to seek to manipulate companies for political or ideological reasons.

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The current approach to SMM, which is now well established, is less intrusive and visible to consumers. Research companies use text-analytics to hunt through the content of social network sites and blogs to monitor references to brands and products. Microsoft has conveniently supplied software tools for social media analysis, which detect brand names and automatically categorises the remarks as positive or negative. This provides a wealth of continuous feedback on what is being said about your brand.

SMM is a combination of observational, quantitative and qualitative techniques applied to consumer-generated scripts. (See figure 1b.)

FIGURE 1B  
RESEARCH METHODS – UNDERLYING CHARACTERISTICS



Using the internet to collect data from ongoing conversations seems to fit well for a generation which is so involved in networking with friends and exchanging views over the internet or by SMS texts. It is a method of this time and era.

Key selling-points of this research approach are:

- A novel, exciting, innovatory technique, which has buzz – it is of its time
- Data is collected anonymously by trawling social messaging sites, etc.
- Obtains spontaneous, self-initiated expressions and opinions about products and brands
- Independent of research bias in framing the agenda and questions
- Opportunity sampling rather than pre-selected quotas
- Automatic analysis of the data through software classification and evaluation of the content. Sometimes this is augmented by human inspection and analysis

However, criticisms have been levied (often by researchers in this field) which can be summarised as follows:

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- The internet arena for social interaction (and therefore data collection) has its own influence on the facets of a person that are opened-up – often self-satisfying or self-indulging
- Unclear who the statements are directed to, and the influence of this ‘unseen’ context and audience in social messaging
- Conducted in cyber-worlds and social milieu with their own expectations, norms, opportunities and conventions that influence self-presentation or ‘personal-branding’, depending on the social groupings involved - remote, anonymous, alter-egos, personal/intimate, experimental
- A context with its own zeitgeist, norms and social expectations about self-presentation that often emphasises outspokenness, free and innovative expression
- The data produced by automatic analyses needs editing or ‘cleansing’ – removing duplications, re-coding of sentiments or values being expressed. There are potential ambiguities in interpreting the meaning of remarks and evaluating whether they are favourable or unfavourable (irony, for example). In a comparison between machine coding and human analysis done for CBS Television by Sentiment360, the machine analysis reported 84% of remarks were ‘passive’, 11% ‘positive’, and 5% negative. However the human analysis found only 30% of remarks were neutral, while 63% were positive. (BuyQualityEbooks.com, 2010)

*“The tools do trawl the internet 24/7, but they can’t be everywhere all the time ... what was needed was a painstaking analysis done by hand as no tool could actually do such a thorough job within the time available” (James Turner, 2010 )*

- There is no facility to contextualise the meaning or to check with the authors for their intentions, or to verify the implications of the comments, and practical implications for behaviour in the everyday world, with its constraints on cost, time, availability, restricted choice, and so forth.

### THE BLOGGING AND SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERIENCE

To fully understand the comments and insights coming from blogging, we need to know more about the people, meanings and intentions in their communications. As in any communication, we have to go beyond the superficial to understand the implications more fully, and make accurate and reliable interpretations.

#### **The nature of social media communication**

People use social networking sites for relaxation, fun, encouragement and status, and as a way of seeking the approval and support of other people (Urista et al, 2009). Some individuals are more likely than others to use the internet for mood management and social compensation by gaining recognition and sustaining relationships.

Increasing interpersonal connectivity, and gaining the attention of more people, increases the ‘social capital’ of individuals as they enlarge their network via bonding and bridging (Ellison, 2007). Users produce content for the admiration of others. Getting reactions builds up your status and apparent popularity, so the more audacious the postings, the better to gain attention. By making yourself outstanding and interesting you build up a distinctive identity. This can often be achieved by having eccentric, extreme views. The aim is to get positive reactions but, for some, negative reactions serve as well to build up their profile and even notoriety.

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Research also suggests there is a notable distinction between online friends and real-world friends. Postings are recognised as a means of self-expression, but not taken at face-value, or as having the same credibility and authority as statements made in the real world (Urista et al, 2009)

### **Motivations and rewards**

While social media have many uses and different underlying motivations, research has come up with some clear and consistent typologies. These are refinements of the Uses and Gratifications models (Rubin, 1983) which underpinned research into TV viewing, as many of you will recognise.

For those familiar with the 'Uses and Gratifications' paradigm, the more recent approach is based on social-cognitive theory rather than needs and gratifications. Here, internet behaviour is seen to be driven by 'behavioural incentives' (rather than 'needs/motives') and 'perceived outcomes of actions' (or gratifications). The language is different, but the underlying concepts are very comparable.

Six basic incentives are posited: Novel sensory experience, Social interaction, Status, Monetary, Enjoyable activity, and Self-reactive incentives (i.e. approval of others) (Bandura, 1986). The change of paradigm was needed because research indicated that conventional Uses and Gratifications research under-emphasised the influence of Status and Monetary incentives in the use of the internet. The perceived ability of the internet to improve one's lot in life, both financially and socially, emerges as a powerful motivating factor for the use of this medium. The internet is used in ways that encourage self-gratification and social display.

*"Now it appears that social status, not social support, might be the prime mover in internet usage"* (LaRose and Eastin, 2004).

Low self-esteem has been shown to relate to high use of the internet for social interaction and fun (Pew Research Center, 2002). Users are able to seek self-gratification and social importance through the use of alter-egos and extreme versions of themselves, that bear little relation to their everyday behaviour.

There is a freedom on the internet to express ourselves and create self-identities without the normal constraints of face-to-face interaction, and the immediate non-verbal feedback that indicates the reactions of others by signalling their doubt, quizzicalness or disapproval. The internet is a means of experimenting, and testing out the reactions of others.

*"[By finding responsive audiences] on the internet and expressing ourselves in those venues, we enhance our social status ... It is a means of constantly exploring and trying out new, improved versions of ourselves."* (LaRose and Eastin, 2004)

More specific research on blogging has extended and added detail to these findings.

Seven motives for social networking were identified by Dan Li (2005): *Documenting the blogger's own life; Improving writing; Self-expression; Appeal of the medium; Acquiring information, Passing time, Socialising.* (An eighth behavioural incentive – 'Passing Time' – was the only factor not correlated with blogging, although it is an important influence on TV viewing and Internet usage.)

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Typical characteristics of social media users are:

- *Active* rather than passive – it needs involvement, takes effort and is planned and purposive
- *Self-referential*. Actively use blogs to satisfy their own needs. Creating a more interesting, distinctive self-image, which often means presenting a more extreme version to produce an individual identity
- *In full control* over the content to express opinions in an attractive and persuasive way to influence others
- *Controlled social interaction*. Postings take place in a specific, specialised social environment with its own norms and expectations that differ from other social contexts (controlled, safe, less threatening, overcoming self-consciousness)
- *Releasing emotion* – an outlet for releasing feelings (Nardi, 2004; Stafford et al, 2004). An individualistic representation of self that provides self-fulfilment (Papacharissi, 2004)
- \* *Self-documenting* - Personal experiences (such as hobbies and interests) were the most common topics of social media postings, which were mostly not original or creative. Self orientated topics are the most popular. The intention is often to create attention and provoke responses and feed-back.
- \* *Self-expression* – ‘Show my personality’. Tell others about myself – an individualistic representation of self that provides self-fulfilment. This factor is also closely related to the social motives in blogging, endorsing the view that bloggers strongly seek to draw attention to themselves and provoke responses

In Dan Li’s study of American students, the last two were the most significant behavioural incentives:

*“Since blogs are a venue for presenting oneself, bloggers choose to establish a self image by directly telling readers something about themselves or indirectly expressing standpoints to some issues to give some hints through.” (p.123)*

It was also found in this research that females were more likely to treat a blog as an isolated online identity which is not closely connected with their offline identity. They were also more open to readers in terms of what they disclosed, while at the same time being more reserved when giving clues to their everyday identity. This again draws attention to the difference between real-world attitudes and values and those expressed through blogs.

Even the boss of Google, Dr. Eric Schmidt has said recently (BBC Newsnight programme, 18th August, 2010) that people are using the internet to boost their social image deliberately, but they may be forced to change their identity to free themselves from the self-images they created when they were young. In the same programme, Sarah Blow, the founder of Girly Geekdom Dinners, described how she separates her ‘Identity’ and the ‘Persona’ she adopts on-line, which can be created around particular settings and situations. She was strongly of the opinion that it is all contrived and constructed on the internet – *‘I have a different persona on Facebook, which is associated with my business, and on Twitter, which is a different me and very transient’*. For her, these multifaceted lives are poorly integrated, self-serving and flippant, as well as unregulated by social reactions and critiques.

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Research suggests women in general consider postings as an interpersonal communication channel, while men perceive them as a mass media expression of their views and opinions. Men do not draw the distinction between their off-line and online identity to the same extent, or they are not as aware of any differentiation. In general, men regarded blogs as an exaggerated extension of their everyday identity into cyber space, and purposefully aim to attract more readers by submitting blogs to search engines or exchanging links with other websites. These findings point to male bloggers' stronger intention to be popular in the blogosphere and to gain the attention of the wider world.

The motivating forces of different bloggers can be identified to some extent from their behaviour on the net, which may assist in interpreting the status and objectives of their comments about everyday life through their blogs. Bloggers who were most driven by social motives provided more links of one sort or another for responses and replies. In contrast stronger needs for self expression corresponded with giving more personal information and less inclination to provide hyper-links

*"Since these bloggers pay more attention to the process of expressing their own opinions, they would be less likely to make efforts to obtain the opinions of others which they may find distracting, and be distracting to their readers"* (Dan Li, 2005)

Also, self-expression, self-documenting and socialisation motives were linked to greater displays of photos of themselves, friends and families (which are other ways of gaining attention and vividly expressing oneself).

### HOW DOES SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING COMPARE WITH OTHER CONSUMER RESEARCH TECHNIQUES?

Commentators have been quick to promote the benefits of SMM and sound warnings for traditional research companies and methods. However, in the hype surrounding the development of SMM, little systematic comparison has been carried out, and the key characteristics and benefits of established methods may be overlooked.

There is a need to remind ourselves, indeed to emphasise the virtues which have been refined over many years of development in current Qualitative and Quantitative research practice, in case these are overlooked in the enthusiasm for the new.

SMM shares some attributes (good and bad) with established Quantitative and Qualitative research approaches, but there are more differences as summarised in table 1.

This table shows some of the key attributes and characteristics of Quantitative and Qualitative research. It also indicates which of these features are shared by Social Media Monitoring.

The table demonstrates that Social Media Monitoring is different to both Qualitative and Quantitative research practices, although it shares more similarities with Quantitative research than Qualitative.

TABLE 1  
COMPARISON OF SMM WITH ESTABLISHED RESEARCH METHODS

<b>SMM similarities with Quant and Qual approaches:</b>	
<b>Quantitative</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Essentially numeric data</li> <li>+ Large samples</li> <li>+ Produce 'sound bites'</li> <li>- Difficulties understanding remarks, evaluating whether favourable or unfavourable (ironic)</li> <li>- Rudimentary scales for strength of feelings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Spontaneous, unprompted views and opinions.</li> <li>+ Unbiased. Receptive, open approach (by trained researchers)</li> <li>+ Freedom for respondents to set the agenda</li> <li>+ Spontaneous remarks and disclosures</li> <li>- Depends on rigorous, insightful, content analyses (unbiased, thorough)</li> <li>- Potential for bias in certain contexts – For example, analysis by untrained researchers</li> </ul>
<b>Quant and Qual differences from SMM:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Precise sampling</li> <li>+ Controlled, standardised questioning</li> <li>+ Ratings and evaluations targeted to research objectives</li> <li>+ Some clarification/probing of meaning and evaluations in responses</li> <li>+ Can test concepts and stimuli</li> <li>- Unclear social expectations/ standards of an anonymous interviewer. Weak relationship</li> <li>- Superficial (even uncomfortable) relationship and situational constraints</li> <li>- Ambiguous role and social expectations restrict/distort self-presentation</li> <li>- Restricted use of stimuli (for developmental research)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Direct contact/ interchange with consumer</li> <li>+ Respondents hear themselves and (in Groups) gain feedback from peers – grounded in realities</li> <li>+ Participants share some relevant common experiences or interests</li> <li>+ Focussed on research objectives. Problem identification and solution orientated</li> <li>+ Intense, active listening (Rogerian interview). Goes beyond superficial</li> <li>+ Detects the 'how people are talking' as well as the 'what people are saying', which indicates the emotions and strength of feelings being expressed</li> <li>+ More opportunities to ground the conversation in real life and the marketplace</li> <li>+ Probe to explore and confirm directly the nuances of ideas, meanings and values.</li> <li>+ Test strength of feelings and the underlying drivers behind attitudes and ideas</li> <li>+ Can challenge self-indulgent/satisfying remarks</li> <li>+ 'Triangulation' to test the validity of attitudes and ideas</li> <li>+ Flexible use of stimuli for concept development</li> <li>- Small samples. Unrepresentative</li> <li>- Unsystematic use of stimuli</li> <li>- Hot-housing decisions and search for unanimity when involvement is weak</li> <li>- 'Rules of engagement' not clearly defined</li> </ul>

+ indicates advantageous features; - are disadvantageous features



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From this table, SMM appears to be a distinct and different kind of research, with its own features, but without many of the desirable attributes found in established Qualitative and Quantitative approaches that have been refined over the years.

It is evident that SMM is not a replica for what can be achieved by other research methods. In particular, it has no role in testing research concepts, new product development, or other research objectives involving the use of stimulus materials.

### WHAT DIFFERENTIATES QUALITATIVE RESEARCH? – THE KEY DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

There are three critical features which differentiate Qualitative Research (as practised in IDIs, Focus Groups, etc.) from SMM. These differences give Qualitative Research a unique position as a research tool which set it apart from other techniques. These lie in its:

- *Direct dialogue* or conversation between consumers and researchers that respects the nuances of meanings
- *Facility to listen* for the underlying narrative (sometimes unspoken) which connects consumer needs, personal goals and driving forces for the brand offering and usage
- *Dynamic, inter-active qualities* to achieve a *meeting of minds* – that is, a shared/mutual understanding of another's world which is negotiated, clarified and agreed, together with the perceptions and motivations underlying that world-view

What differentiates SMM from Qualitative research is its remoteness and vagueness in understanding what was really meant by what was written, in terms of its: contextualisation, aims and intentions; meaning and values for the speaker; underlying motivations and relevance in the real world;

In qualitative research, we can move from statements of belief and opinion to a deeper understanding of consumer perceptions, attitudes, and intentions that underpin those beliefs, and can be addressed directly by means of the ongoing conversation.

### **The importance of conversation in revealing consumer attitudes and understanding perceptions, intentions and actions**

According to Harre (1979), the standard for interviews is that they should approximate to everyday, interpersonal conversations, which facilitate social interaction and social order. Ordinary conversation is dependable as an expression of personal ideas and attitudes *unless* there are grounds for believing otherwise (in the way something is said, from contradictions in the statements made, assessment of the likelihood of bias). If not, one-to-one human interaction would cease to have meaning and usefulness.

The key features that distinguish an 'everyday conversation' (as opposed to other types of social exchanges) are based on '*getting to know each other*'. This involves interest in knowing about the other person, some mutual sharing of opinions and attitudes, equality of status, openness and self-revelation, avoidance of criticism and blame (accepting). Conversation is made up of accounts (or stories) about personal events, individual understanding of the world around (including products and brands), aims and ambitions, perceptions of the ways in which social interactions work, and the implicit rules and values guiding ambitions, choices and lifestyles. (For a fuller explanation, see: Branthwaite, 1983)

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Respondents' accounts, obtained in these circumstances of apparently ordinary conversations, are useful in revealing their perceptions of the social world, desirable reputations and ways of achieving them, the way rules work in achieving (or hindering) social goals, and the values associated with goals, products and activities used to create our social identities.

However, accounts should not be taken simply at face value. Personal accounts (or the commentary surrounding our actions and intentions) are more self-conscious and self-justifying than the actions themselves, because they represent the way the actor would like to be judged. This is one of the values of projective techniques which frame the actions as those of 'someone else'. We are more reliable at predicting the behaviour of other people than of ourselves, because the former accounts are not prejudiced by self-presentational biases. However, there is also value and usefulness in knowing how the rules and rewards of social behaviour would ideally work for the consumer.

In order to get beyond self-justifying accounts, *skill* and *sensitivity* are required from an interviewer:

- The '*skill*' of interviewing is in overcoming the immediate constraints and artificiality of the interview context, and focussing the respondent on the social situation (and systems) where the social actions of interest take place (e.g.: buying, using, displaying, enjoying brands and products). This is achieved by getting involved in the interviewee's social world and sharing their feelings about the situation.
- '*Sensitivity*' lies in listening to an account and detecting the cues (verbal and non-verbal) which differentiate between the rhetoric (the things which are said because they are the socially prescribed view, as well as the socially inspired gloss that is put onto a situation) and the more inwardly personal perspective.

*Listening* has long been recognised as a key resource in the qualitative research interview, along with its dynamic and interactive features. Emphasis was again directed to the importance of sensitive listening at the recent IJMR Research Methods Forum entitled 'Start Listening, stop asking', where the main concerns were that the questions in questionnaires shape and bias responses.

The solution provided by SMM is to collect spontaneous outpourings of opinions and attitudes. However, without a full awareness of the context in which these statements are made, it is difficult to fully understand, or be certain about their meanings.

In a brief commentary on the IJMR Forum, Roy Langmaid (2010) gives an extraordinary insight into what listening means. As Langmaid shows, Qualitative research is much more effective at this task, and has a wide range of techniques to improve listening and understanding of what is meant in conversation:

- *Building* an atmosphere of positive regard with the interviewee (Rogers, 2004)
- *Scanning* continuously during the interview for alternative meanings
- *Awareness* of non-verbal communication of values and attitudes
- *Probing* for clarification and deeper understanding

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- *Tuning-in* to different layers of the internal conversations which take place in the speakers mind – the private; the public; the serious or playful; the ruminating/speculating; the closing-off when there is reluctance to reveal more and the need for personal certainty and resolution
- *Triangulation* – asking the same question in different ways
- *Cultivating* intrigued curiosity in listening to what others say

### CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative Research and Social Media Monitoring have similarities in their objectives, but their differences in approach and technique mean that what they can achieve is widely separated.

Both methods put a high value on spontaneity of expression, but the ways in which they achieve this, and their ability to link the meaning of utterances to underlying motives, perceptions, relationships with brands, interest in products and services, and their uses for them in everyday life, are very different.

Qualitative Research is a unique approach in understanding and learning from consumers, with a greater capacity for research-based insights into their thoughts, feelings and actions. In particular, qualitative research functions by understanding the intention as well as the context of what is said, and its relevance to behaviour in real situations with their inherent barriers and costs.

Social media monitoring has more similarities with quantitative research techniques and may be a very efficient way of validating findings from qualitative research on larger samples.

In the context of research objectives, qualitative research should be focused on gaining insights and the understanding of process – how marketing works in meeting consumer needs and ambitions. SMM is one possible way to monitor movement and trends in the market place, but it is less sensitive in detecting the causes of that change, or the remedies.

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