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# Editorial: Qualitative research in business marketing management

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## 1. Introduction

By investigating the development, extent, and nature of qualitative research published in *Industrial Marketing Management* (*IMM*) over a recent decade, 2008–2017, we seek to offer an insightful review of its geographical coverage, range in thematic focus, theoretical purposes, research designs, and the transparency of the research methods adopted. In turn, we can consider how authors have made their methodological choices and implemented them in these studies. Finally, we provide an impact assessment, based on the number of citations and downloads.

## 2. Theoretical background

In marketing management research, as in other areas of business research, qualitative methods support various theory development efforts, including theory generation, elaboration, and testing, as well as critical theory efforts. Whereas theory generation aims to establish new ideas through the development of testable propositions, theory elaboration builds on existing conceptual ideas and frameworks to inform study designs, typically without any formal hypotheses. Theory testing involves the use of extant theory too, but in this case, it proposes formal hypotheses. Finally, critical theory seeks to bring about "radical changes," with explicit, often political agendas (Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynski, 1999).

Qualitative research also might be characterized according to the adopted design and methods. In mixed-method efforts, qualitative studies accompany quantitative research, such as to test hypotheses suggested by qualitative insights (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). In this sense, qualitative and quantitative research provide complementary evidence: The former creates hypotheses, and the latter tests them empirically. But what constitutes good qualitative research, and which standards and criteria should inform any such evaluation? Qualitative and quantitative research differ fundamentally, in both their designs and methods, so a related question pertains to whether qualitative research can or should be evaluated by the same standards as quantitative research, or if it needs its own set of standards.

The answers are not straightforward. Due to their different data and methods, features that may be desirable and useful for one type of research may be less useful or even irrelevant to the other. In addition, some journals and their reviewers appear clearly more inclined to favor one or the other type of research (Pratt, 2009), which could encourage, for example, qualitative researchers to present their work in a more quantitative light, with multiple qualitative cases, to stake claims to validity and statistical generalizability (e.g., Dyer Jr & Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991). Yet good qualitative research already is difficult and challenging to undertake on its own; Rynes and Gephart (Rynes & Gephart Jr., 2004, p. 460) even assert that "Many scholars believe good qualitative research is more difficult and time consuming to create than good quantitative research." Regardless of the demonstrable truth of this statement, it highlights that authors of qualitative research must offer some key evidence of quality, including transparency about their analyses (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011), clarification of the research gap they seek to address, their study's theoretical purpose, and why they choose some particular context or unit of analysis (Pratt, 2009).

In acknowledging these features, we seek to evaluate the extent and nature of qualitative research published in *IMM* over the decade 2008–2017. With a structured coding protocol, we assess the quality of these articles according to multiple dimensions, recommended by previous research (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Bluhm et al., 2011; Pratt, 2009): transparent research methods and data analyses, justifications of the research methodology and empirical context, clear description of the process for obtaining findings, suggestions for further research, acknowledgement of limitations, and so on. We also track how research quality and topics have shifted over this decade. Thus we can offer a commentary on the quality and characteristics of qualitative research that has appeared in *IMM* and draw preliminary conclusions about which research topics currently appear most important for qualitative

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researchers.

## 3. Method

The sample was drawn from 1417 articles published in *IMM* during 2008–2017. We filtered this set of all published articles to identify empirical research that solely or partially relies on a qualitative research methodology, in accordance with the design, measurement, and analysis taxonomy proposed by Aguinis, Pierce, Bosco, and Muslin (2009). Using the design subcategories, we qualified each article as qualitative research. In addition, in line with a description of qualitative research offered by Lee et al. (1999), we assigned an article to this category if it exhibits a qualitative research design (e.g., case studies, ethnography, grounded theories, action research) and related methods (e.g., interviews, observations, document/archival, diaries, focus groups). We also include mixed-methods research in our sample, because they combine qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, using complementary analyses (Johnson et al., 2007; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Because non-empirical articles do not report any empirical data and focus on theory conceptualization, methodological developments, literature reviews, critiques of research paradigms, and so on, we exclude them. Overall, we identify 333 articles that use qualitative or mixed methods, which we then sort by year (ascending) and the first author's surname (alphabetical). Next, we divide them into two subsamples: 165 articles published between 2008 and 2013 and then 168 articles published between 2013 and 2017.

For the content analysis and coding of the two subsamples, as performed by two of this editorial's authors, we examine each article on the basis of a structured coding protocol (Table 1). To delineate how qualitative research in *IMM* has evolved over 2008–2017, particularly with regard to its methodological rigor and impact, the structured coding protocol includes 13 themes, which broadly reflect four elements that capture qualitative research's (1) thematic focus and theoretical purpose, (2) research methodology and transparency of the method and analysis, (3) discussion of limitations and future research, and (4) author characteristics and research impact.

First, the thematic focus encompasses 14 research themes, derived on the basis of the top 50 most used key phrases in titles and abstracts in *IMM*, which in turn reflect important concepts for business marketing management. These 50 phrases can be reduced to the 14 research themes by grouping similar phrases. The labels for the research themes reflect the commonalities of the included phrases (see Table 1). With regard to theoretical purpose, we again rely on Lee et al.'s (1999) categorization of theory generation, theory elaboration, and theory testing; no articles represent critical theory, so we dropped it from further consideration. However, we added a new category, beyond the three theoretical purposes, to represent articles that aim to describe specific situations or empirical settings.

Second, to write high-quality, qualitative articles for top-tier journals, Pratt (2009) suggests qualitative researchers should include "the basics" in their research design section: a clear justification of the theoretical purpose, the research methodology, the empirical context (e.g., sampling), and the unit of analysis, as well as a clear explanation of the process by which the study's findings have been derived from data (e.g., interview guide, data source, coding process). Accordingly, our structured coding protocol includes the following considerations (Bluhm et al., 2011): research design (six categories; see Table 1), data collection methods (eight categories; see Table 1), multitude (number of sources of evidence), temporality (cross-sectional or longitudinal), justification of methodology (adequately justified, partly justified or incomplete, or extremely vague or missing), transparency of research methods (transparent, mostly transparent, extremely vague or missing), and transparency of data analysis (same transparency categories).

Third, the structured coding protocol accounted for acknowledgments of the study's limitations and research avenues, each categorized as adequate, incomplete, or missing. Fourth, they recorded information about the authors (number and first author's geographic afflation, to establish a profile of qualitative research published in *IMM*). To measure the impact, we gathered the number of citations of each article from the journal's publisher (as of April 26, 2019).

To ensure the two responsible authors analyzed and coded the data consistently and according to the structured coding protocol, they performed three coding exercise rounds. In each round, the authors coded a selection of articles independently, then compared the results, discussed

**Table 1**
Structured coding protocol.

| Themes | Elements Capturing Qualitative Research |
|---|---|
| *Study Focus & Theoretical Purpose* | |
| - Thematic focus | - Networks and networking |
| | - Business relationships |
| | - Services |
| | - Value creation |
| | - Interactions |
| | - Selling and customers |
| | - Purchasing and suppliers |
| | - Innovations and new product development |
| | - Capabilities |
| | - Relationship dynamics |
| | - Relationship formations |
| | - Business models |
| | - Virtual environment |
| | - Performance |
| - Theoretical purpose | - Describe or present a specific situation/empirical setting without discussion on, or contribution to, the advance of marketing management theories; simply application of marketing management theories |
| | - Generate marketing management theories |
| | - Elaborate marketing management theories |
| | - Test marketing management theories |
| *Qualitative Methodology* | |
| - Research design | - Narrative (and discourse) study |
| | - Phenomenology |
| | - Grounded theory |
| | - Ethnography |
| | - Case studies (single or multiple) |
| | - Action research |
| | - Other |
| | - Unspecified |
| - Data collection methods | - Interviews |
| | - Observations |
| | - Participant observations |
| | - Documentary/archival data |
| | - Questionnaires |
| | - Focus groups |
| | - Diaries |
| | - Other |
| - Multitude of data sources and temporality | - Number of sources of evidence |
| | - Longitudinal or cross sectional |
| - Justification of methodology | - Adequately justified |
| | - Partly justified or incomplete |
| | - Extremely vague or missing |
| - Transparency of research methods | - Descriptions are transparent and detailed enough for the study to be replicated confidently |
| - Transparency of data analysis | - Descriptions are mostly transparent, with information missing for one aspect of the study or simply not detailed enough for multiple aspects of the study for the study to be replicated confidently, or |
| | - Descriptions are incomplete, missing, or extremely vague so that details are not enough for the study to be replicated confidently |
| *Limitations & Future Research Avenues* | |
| - Limitations | - Adequate |
| - Future research avenues | - Incomplete |
| | - Missing |
| *Authors & Impact* | |
| - Authors | - Number of authors |
| | - Geographic affiliation of the fist author |
| - Impact | - Citations |

any discrepancies, and sought agreement. This stepwise approach produced a consensus, and by the end of the third round, both authors were confident about their intercoder consistency.

## 4. Findings

Most qualitative research in business marketing management is submitted by authors from European universities (first author's affiliation). In 2008–2012, 78% of the qualitative research came from Europe; in 2013–2017, this percentage increased to 80% (Fig. 1). This predominance might not be totally unexpected, in that articles from European-based authors have accounted for 50% to more than 70% of all *IMM* articles since 2009 (Di Benedetto & Lindgreen, 2018). Nevertheless, the numbers suggest that qualitative research is especially strongly representative of European-based authors.

In a further breakdown to the European country level (Fig. 2), we find that across the 10-year period, the top three European sources were Finland (27%), Sweden (12%), and the United Kingdom (21%). Notably, between 2008 and 2012 and 2013–2017, Finland's share almost doubled (94%), from 17% to 33%, such that during the latter sub period, it contributes almost one-third of all qualitative research submitted from Europe. In parallel, Swedish and U.K. researchers decreased their shares, from 17% and 26% in 2008–2012 to 9% and 18% in 2013–2017, respectively. France also stands out, due to the increase by 175% between 2008 and 2012 and 2013–2017, such that its share of European-based submissions of qualitative research rose from 4% to 11%.

### 4.1. Study focus and theoretical purpose

#### 4.1.1. Thematic focus

In terms of the thematic focus of qualitative research articles published in *IMM* during 2008–2017, the most popular are selling and customers (15%), networks and networking (14%), and value creation (11%), followed by business relationships (9%) and innovations and new product development (9%). Fig. 3 depicts shifts in their popularity over the two sub periods. Moving from 2008 to 2012 to 2013–2017, researchers in business marketing management still favor selling and customers (increase of 1%), but networks and networking (from 17% to 12%), value creation (from 15% to 9%), and interactions (from 9% to 4%) all experience noticeable drops in popularity. In turn, other thematic foci emerged and expanded in popularity, including business relationships (from 8% to 10%), innovations and new product development (from 5% to 11%), services (from 2% to 7%), and performance (from 2% to 4%). No qualitative research pertaining to the thematic focus of business models appeared during 2008–2012, but in the latter sub period, 5% of all qualitative research adopted this theme.

#### 4.1.2. Theoretical purpose

A majority of qualitative research studies sought to generate marketing management theories (55%) or elaborate on them (41%), whereas testing marketing management theories is relatively rare (3%). This observation broadly aligns with other management studies (e.g., Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Bluhm et al., 2011). For example, Bluhm et al. (2011) find that in 1999–2008, theory testing accounts for just 16% of the qualitative research in top-tier management journals. The notion of theory testing is more akin to positivist thinking and typically associated with quantitative research, such as experiments and survey design. This observation prompts a question, namely, whether a stereotypical view of theory testing has limited its application in qualitative research (Bluhm et al., 2011; Lee et al., 1999). We concur with Lee et al.'s (1999) call for qualitative researchers to dedicate efforts to not only generating and elaborating theory but also producing "good" theory that advances the field, engendering a theory development agenda through continuous conjecturing and probing, and eventually establishing predictive validity. In our research sample, a few articles (1.5%) do not match any of these three categories. That is, rather than generating, elaborating, or testing theory, they describe or present a specific situation or unique empirical setting. We provide examples of articles that illustrate these theory purposes. In so doing though, we highlight the struggle associated with singling out just a few of the many great articles published in *IMM* and ask readers to bear this difficulty in mind.

In an article indicative of a theory generation effort, Terho, Haas, Eggert, and Ulaga (2012) seek to determine ways to implement a company's value orientation at the sales force level. With a conceptualization of value-based selling, they contribute to value-based sales marketing theory. The study data come from 11 sales managers, each of whom represents an internationally operating company, of different sizes and competing in various industries, so that the study reveals a wide variety of facets related to value-based selling behaviors. These authors conduct an initial review of customer value and selling literature to develop their interview guide, then gather insights about the facets (and sub dimensions) of value-based selling behaviors by eliciting managers' own interpretations of their experiences. In addition, the authors describe their approach to questioning and probing clearly (e.g., "carefully phrased the questions to elicit responses in an unobtrusive, nondirective manner, and avoid the potential pitfalls of 'active

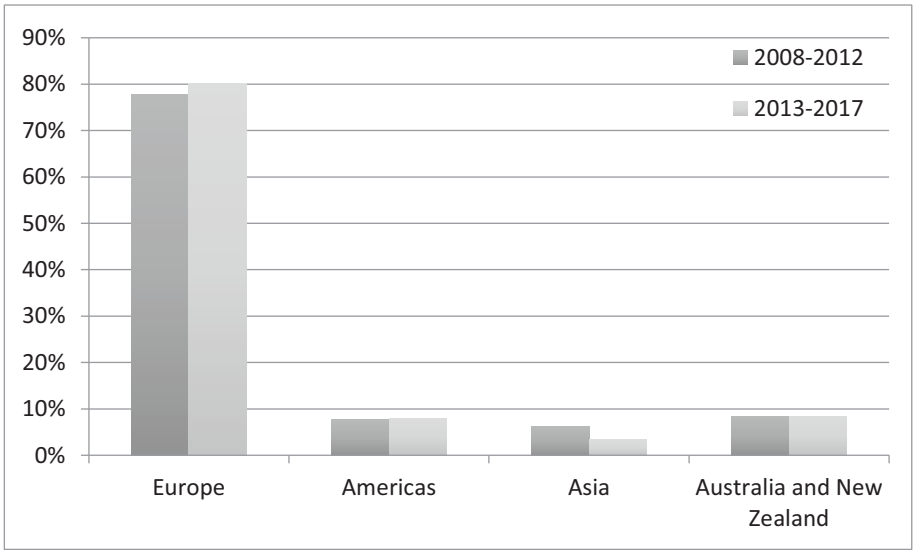


**Fig. 1.** Authors' geographical affiliation by continent.

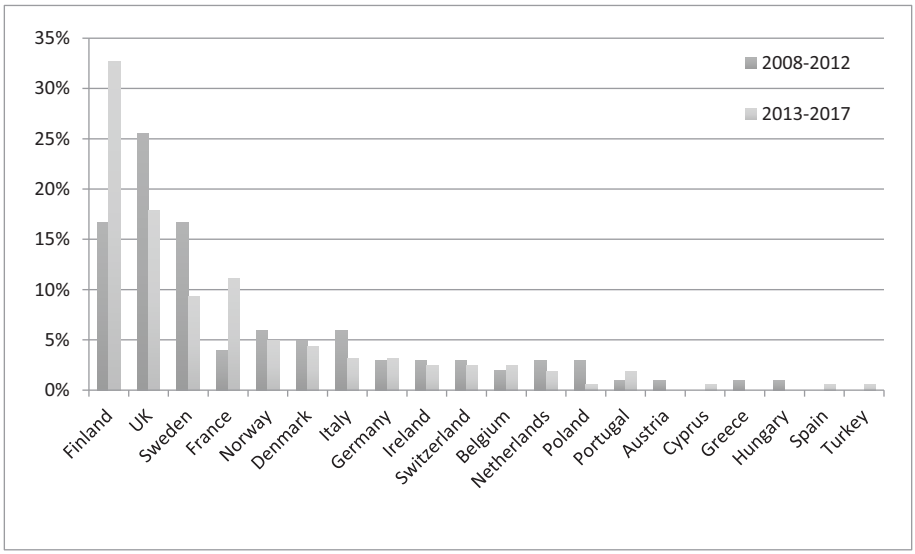


**Fig. 2.** Authors' geographical affiliation by European country.

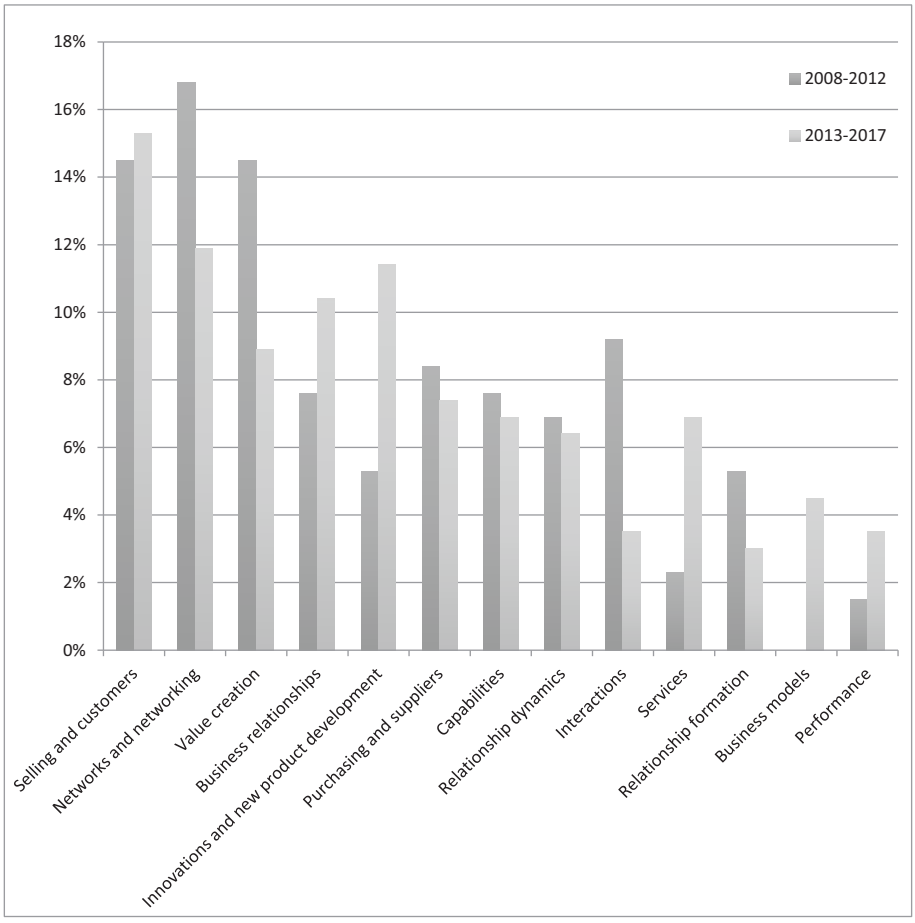


**Fig. 3.** Thematic focus.

listening'"). Thus, they observe emerging insights from the managers' unique experiences. The grounded theory approach to the data analysis includes open, axial, and selective coding, a process laid out clearly in the article. The findings include identification of three dimensions of value-based selling behaviors and their potential consequences.

In their theory elaboration effort, Guenzi and Storbacka (2015) argue that adopting a key account management program is a customer-centric change initiative. To motivate their research, the authors identify a knowledge gap regarding how to manage key account management implementation efforts. The study uses a case study, combined with the well-established McKinsey 7S model (Waterman Jr, Peters, & Phillips, 1980), to describe a multinational company that adopted key account management in one of its local branches. The collection and triangulation of multiple sources of data (interviews, internal documents,

observations) helps establish analytic generalizability and construct validity; the empirical study also relies on multiple researchers to perform the data analysis, which creates researcher triangulation, and then the case company's CEO and managers review the findings to affirm the data validation further. With an abductive logic, the authors apply the 7S model and existing theory in change management, then refine the theory through a detailed account of what took place in the case company. The resulting elaborative framework describes key success factors for the adoption of key account management.

As noted, theory testing in qualitative research is relatively rarer. One approach relies on mixed methods, such that the empirical qualitative study provides testable propositions, and subsequent quantitative research tests them (e.g., Ng, Ding, & Yip, 2013). For example, Lee and Trim (2012) examine the role of an organizational cultural value system for explaining how managers rely on mutuality to establish partnership arrangements in vertical marketing systems. The authors offer four propositions, related to a company's customer service policy, process of innovation, relationship marketing, and comparative national culture. To test the propositions, they apply a case study research approach, using in-depth interviews with senior managers from Japanese and Korean electronics companies based in the United Kingdom. The interview guide is based on theoretical concepts in prior literature, and with a deductive logic, the authors compare and contrast their findings with this theory. In turn, they establish the process by which organizational value systems influence the formation of mutuality in managers' minds, which affects their decision-making process regarding the partnership arrangement's marketing activities. The propositions are validated through illustrative practices identified in the dyadic partnering companies. The results mostly confirm the propositions, yet nuanced differences between the two culturally distinct nations also reveal how strategic marketing frameworks can evolve and give rise to vertical marketing systems.

Finally, Bunduchi's (2008) single case study research design describes how a new context, e-commerce in interorganizational exchanges, can be analyzed using trust, dependency, and transaction costs. The stated motivation for the study is the rise of information technology, which transformed how organizations interact in value networks that feature embedded knowledge and resources, rather than just transactions. The author justifies the single case study, by noting that it provides clarity and connects the focal constructs to a specific empirical setting. The article carefully does not claim to test or validate the theory but rather intends to provide "a guide for further research developments" (p. 613). The chosen case company is a leading organization in its use of electronic markets, more intensely than other large organizations. Three semi-structured interviews provide the main data source, complemented by secondary sources for data triangulation. The deductive coding approach relies on a coding scheme derived from prior literature, including the extent of uses, functionalities, and the three focal constructs (trust, transaction costs, and dependency). The results suggest that both transactional cost and social exchange theoretical perspectives independently explain the use of e-commerce for transactional and relational characteristics in isolation, but an integrated framework effectively explains the interrelations among key constructs.

### 4.2. Qualitative methodology

Table 2 summarizes the qualitative research methodologies adopted, for the full period (2008–2017) and two sub periods (2008–2012 and 2013–2017).

#### 4.2.1. Research design and justification of methodology

Over the entire period, about three-quarters (78.1%) of *IMM* qualitative research features case study designs to investigate some phenomena in situ. With case studies, authors can explore the complexity of a social phenomenon for various purposes, including theory development (e.g., Aaboen, Dubois, & Lind, 2012; Smits & Kok, 2012), holistic analyses of unexplored phenomena (e.g., Ritala, Golnam, & Wegmann, 2014), descriptions of complex processes (e.g., Macdonald, Wilson, Martinez, & Toossi, 2011), or identifying organizational behavioral actions (Tunisini & Bocconcelli, 2009). Across the two sub periods, this method increased in popularity, rising from 66.4% to 85.6%, as the percentage of all other research designs diminished, from 8.4% to 7%. Less common research designs such as narrative (and discourse) studies, ethnography, grounded theory, and action research account for only 5.4% in total. For example, a narrative approach to data collection and analysis helped construct actors' sensemaking for intertwined processes over time (Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017), and action research

**Table 2**
Uses of qualitative methodology.

| Key aspect | Percentage, 2008–2017 ($n$ = 333) | Percentage 2008–2012 ($n$ = 131) | Percentage 2013–2017 ($n$ = 202) | Trend |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Research design* | | | | |
| - Narrative (and discourse) study | 2.4 (8) | 3.8 (5) | 1.5 (3) | ↓ |
| - Phenomenology | Nil | Nil | Nil | ↓ |
| - Grounded theory | 1.8 (6) | 2.3 (3) | 1.5 (3) | ↓ |
| - Ethnography | 0.6 (2) | 0.8 (1) | 0.5 (1) | ↑ |
| - Case studies (single or multiple) | 78.1 (260) | 66.4 (87) | 85.6 (173) | ↓ |
| - Action research | 0.6 (2) | 1.5 (2) | 0 (0) | ↓ |
| - Unspecified | 16.5 (55) | 25.2 (33) | 10.9 (22) | ↓ |
| *Data collection methods* | | | | |
| - Interviews | 52.70 (313) | 46.40 (127) | 58.10 (186) | ↑ |
| - Observations | 7.60% (45) | 10.60 (29) | 5.00 (16) | ↓ |
| - Participant observations | 2.20 (13) | 2.90 (8) | 1.60% (5) | ↓ |
| - Documentary/ archival data | 25.90 (154) | 26.60 (73) | 25.30 (81) | ↓ |
| - Questionnaires | 5.70 (34) | 8.40 (23) | 3.40% (11) | ↓ |
| - Focus groups | 3.20 (19) | 2.20 (6) | 4.10 (13) | ↑ |
| - Diaries | 0.20 (1) | 0.40 (1) | 0.00 (0) | ↓ |
| - Other | 2.50 (15) | 2.60 (7) | 2.50 (8) | ↓ |
| *Multitude of data sources* | | | | |
| - One | 42.6 (142) | 25.2 (33) | 54 (109) | ↑ |
| - Two | 39.3 (131) | 46.6 (61) | 34.7 (70) | ↓ |
| - Three | 14.7 (49) | 21.4 (28) | 10.4 (21) | ↓ |
| - Four | 3.3 (11) | 6.9 (9) | 1 (2) | ↓ |
| *Temporality* | | | | |
| - Longitudinal | 15.6 (52) | 17.6 (23) | 14.4 (29) | ↓ |
| - Cross-sectional | 84.4 (281) | 82.4 (108) | 85.6 (173) | ↑ |
| *Justification of methodology* | | | | |
| - Adequately justified | 56.2 (187) | 63.4 (83) | 51.5 (104) | ↓ |
| - Partly justified or incomplete | 33.0 (110) | 34.4 (45) | 32.2 (65) | ↓ |
| - Extremely vague or missing | 10.8 (36) | 2.3 (3) | 16.4 (33) | ↑ |
| *Transparency of research method* | | | | |
| - Transparent | 51.7 (172) | 32.1 (42) | 64.4 (130) | ↑ |
| - Mostly transparent | 39.3 (131) | 56.5 (74) | 28.2 (57) | ↓ |
| - Incomplete, missing, or vague | 9.0 (30) | 11.5 (15) | 7.4 (15) | ↓ |
| *Transparency of data analysis* | | | | |
| - Transparent | 32.7 (109) | 28.2 (37) | 35.6 (72) | ↑ |
| - Mostly transparent | 39.3 (131) | 41.2 (54) | 38.1 (77) | ↓ |
| - Incomplete, missing, or vague | 27.9 (93) | 30.5 (40) | 26.2 (53) | ↓ |
| *Limitations* | | | | |
| - Adequate | 11.4 (38) | 13.7 (18) | 9.9 (20) | ↓ |
| - Incomplete | 37.8 (126) | 55.0 (72) | 26.7 (54) | ↓ |
| - Missing | 50.8 (169) | 31.3 (41) | 63.4 (128) | ↑ |
| *Future research avenues* | | | | |
| - Adequate | 49.5 (165) | 51.9 (68) | 48.0 (97) | ↓ |
| - Incomplete | 34.8 (116) | 30.5 (40) | 37.6 (76) | ↑ |
| - Missing | 15.6 (52) | 17.6 (23) | 14.4 (29) | ↓ |

Notes: The numbers of articles in each group are in parentheses.

documented iterative processes of action and learning embedded in the actors' relationships (Mele, 2011). Grounded theory can be used to explore a previously unexplored literature area, as well as develop and devise new frameworks or methods for examining a construct of interest (Keränen & Jalkala, 2013).

The choice of research design is informed primarily by the research questions (Yin, 2014) but also might reflect the researchers' philosophical stances (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012). The inherent ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research design inform the rationales for some essential methodological elements, such as sampling, data collection methods, and the analytical approach. Thus it is critically important for researchers to provide a clear description of their research design, to establish a strong justification for the methodological choices. Yet many articles do not specify their research design (16.5%), or else do not include enough details about the methodology or simply refer to a qualitative research approach. In detail, over the entire study period, qualitative researchers do not provide adequate justification for their chosen methodology (56.2%) or offer only a partly adequate justification (33.0%). A worrisome trend shows a substantial increase in 2013–2017 of articles that provide an extremely vague justification (from 2.3% to 16.4%) (and, in some cases, there is no justification at all). This omission could reflect the very common use of case study research designs; perhaps authors regard a case study research design as widely accepted and thus see no need to justify this research design.

#### 4.2.2. Data collection methods and multitude of data sources

The most frequently adopted method for data collection over the years 2008–2017 is interviews (52.7%). Interviewing enables researchers to elicit personal views from organizational actors, which tend to be nuanced and idiosyncratic (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005). Other methods include documentary/archival data collection (25.9%), participation and participant observations (combined 9.8%), and questionnaires (5.7%). The documentary/archival data and (participant) observations data generally serve to enrich or cross-validate the interview data, if multiple sources of data are collected. For example, Abrahamsen, Henneberg, and Naudé (2012) observe participants during discussions and meetings to gain new perspectives on their case study.

Multiple sources of data can increase construct validity in qualitative research and support the development of "converging lines of inquiry," such that construct validity can be demonstrated through the triangulation of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014, p. 120). Over the entire 2008–2017 period, qualitative research in *IMM* mostly features one (42.6%) or two (39.3%) data sources. According to an independent *t*-test though, there are significant differences in the number of data sources used across the two sub periods ($t = 0.5.925$; $df = 331$; $p < .000$). Compared with 2008–2012, when only 25.2% of studies used a single source of data, the number of data sources drastically decreases in 2013–2017, such that more than half of all studies (54%) rely on single-source data. This downward trend is concerning; *IMM* qualitative researchers might not be adopting necessary measures, such as collecting multiple sources of data, to produce robust, convincing results and ensure the rigor of their theory development efforts.

#### 4.2.3. Temporality

Most organizational research theories are longitudinal at least to some degree, but most researchers take a static, cross-sectional approach to interrogating organizational phenomena (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Qualitative research can help explain and describe the process (es) of a phenomenon, within which time is inevitably imbued, yet still not deal with that effect, conceptually or empirically. Longitudinal research seeks to understand dynamic changes in the constructs or variables under study; cross-sectional research can only offer a static representation. During the overall study period, 84.4% of the qualitative articles employ a cross-sectional approach. When articles claim to have undertaken longitudinal research, we also find that some of them do not describe explicitly how they dealt with time, conceptually (e.g., how something evolves over time and what it means) or empirically (e.g., how different time points relate to the data collected) (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Simply spending extended time in the field is not sufficient to qualify as a longitudinal research design (Saldaña, 2003).

Of the actual longitudinal research studies we reviewed, one stood out for its clear justification and explanation. Baptista (2013) examines the development of customer–supplier relationships in the mining industry, which are characterized by context, task characteristics, and interaction processes. This longitudinal case study investigates four long-term relationships in the Portuguese metal mining industry, encompassing both retrospective and real-time longitudinal considerations of the long-term relationships. With this research design, the researcher could reconstruct dynamic aspects of the development of the dyadic relationships, which facilitates understanding of the context and the events as they took place. This longitudinal, real-time research spanned a period of approximately 18 months and included interview and documentary/archival data collections, referring to different points in time. The analytical approach seeks to build explanations on the basis of the longitudinal data and thereby establish causal links among the key variables under study.

#### 4.2.4. Transparency of research methods

Most articles offer transparency (51.7%) or mostly transparency (39.3%) in describing their research methods, but these high percentages are driven mainly by those published later, in the 2013–2017 sub period (64.4%), rather than its earlier counterpart (32.1%). To recognize the exact data collection methods used, readers need clear, detailed accounts of the research plan and execution. Not all articles painstakingly describe their methods, particularly if the methods seem peripheral to the main data source. For example, some studies do not describe the observations they gathered or offer only limited details about how they undertook the observations. Therefore, readers cannot be certain whether a mentioned observation took place in an objective, distant manner or through participant observation with researchers' involvement in situ. Some observations presume a passive position by the researcher, without any involvement or intervention, but during participant observation, the researcher takes a proactive approach and becomes part of the observation, such as by participating during an organizational meeting. Palo and Tähtinen (2013) make a clear distinction and report the use of both participant observations and observations through meetings to capture present and future aspects of the phenomenon they study.

Another gap arises with regard to lacking details about interview guides as data collection instruments (Kvale, 1983). Unlike a structured, quantitative questionnaire, an interview guide cites higher-level topics to cover; it outlines how the key themes or a framework should be explored during conversations between an interviewer and an interviewee. The questions (including probing questions) should be developed on the basis of theoretical considerations (Kvale, 2007). But the interview guide also can evolve, as the empirical study progresses, and be modified following each interview, to ensure its appropriateness and increase the internal validity of the interviews (King, 2004). Friend and Johnson (2014) provide a clear description of their semi-structured interview guide, in which 23 questions were divided into five schemes, derived from prior literature: (1) account team effectiveness and interaction with decision makers; (2) needs and expectations, related to the client's requirements, supplier's understanding of client's emerging needs, and supplier's perceived capabilities; (3) insights about the actions competitors are undertaking to acquire accounts/gain share; (4) value propositions in the form of increased revenues, reduced costs, and increased value; and (5) communications tools, both effective and in need of improvement. The authors state explicitly that interviewees were "probed beyond the semi-structured interview guide in order to better understand the underlying drivers of the relationship evaluation and considerations for future business" (p. 647).

The description of the research method also should be clear and detailed enough to enable readers to replicate the study by following the "instructions" provided in the methodology section. A good example comes from Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson (2013). Their study features four case companies, selected on the basis of an embedded design, which supports two levels of analysis. They deploy a logical replication to ensure external validity, which also enhances the robustness of the results. Due to their theoretical sampling approach, they selected high-tech companies in Finland, which helped control for cross-industry differences. Next, they outlined clearly defined criteria, according to five principles. Multiple sources of evidence were collected from 21 in-depth interviews with multiple actors, triangulated with observational data. Company presentations, financial data, prior studies, and news releases from the founding of the case companies also provide additional support. In turn, the authors could summarize the number of interviews from each company, the year, interviewed persons, time period covered, and other sources of information in a table. They adopted an explanation-building analytical approach and used Nvivo to categorize and organize the collected data. To address validity issues, they highlighted the multiple sources of data, clear chain of evidence, and multiple researchers' perspectives. For reliability, they noted their careful data collection process and formation of a case database; they also asked key informants to check the draft transcripts.

#### 4.2.5. Transparency of data analysis

With regard to transparency in the data analysis, 32.7% and 39.3% of the articles are transparent or mostly transparent, respectively; the remaining 27.9% offer incomplete, missing, or vague descriptions of how the data were analyzed. For example, one study omitted details of how the qualitative data were analyzed in its mixed methods setting, so readers could not discern how the qualitative results informed and led to the quantitative research effort. Another study described how the data were recorded and transcribed but did not provide any details of the analytical approach, so readers could not understand how the findings were derived through the analytical process. Compared with 2008–2012, the 2013–2017 sub period reveals a 7.4% increase in the number of articles with a transparent description; the other categories all decrease slightly. A best practice with regard to providing transparent data analytical strategies is evident in Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola's (2012) study of the activities, roles, and resources of buyer–supplier collaborative value co-creation processes for knowledge-intensive business services. They collect two data sets, featuring 120 interviews with suppliers and buyers. Then with an abductive logic, they built on existing conceptual insights. The principal constructs, activities, roles, resources, and resulting values were examined using their data set 1, Nvivo, and MS Word tabling, which revealed various differences and similarities that in turn establish greater understanding of the phenomena under study. Then data set 2 served to confirm the relevance of the categories identified from the analysis of data set 1 and develop a more robust conceptual understanding. The two data sets were collected by different researchers, so data triangulation helped ensure the robustness of the results and construct validity.

#### 4.2.6. Limitations and future research avenues

Over 2008–2012, only 11.4% of qualitative articles adequately outline their research limitations and how the authors tackled or overcame them. Another 37.8% reveal some limitations and resolutions, though incompletely, such as describing the limitations but not mentioning how the authors addressed them. In these studies, the limitations also tend to underlie suggestions for further research. Almost half of the articles adequately describe research avenues (49.5%), which suggests that further theory development should be based on their findings; another 38.4% of articles do so incompletely, such that they might lack details about how the conclusions were drawn (i.e., from the authors' own research). A substantial proportion (15.6%) of articles do not offer any suggestions for continued research. Although typically the last section of an article, it is critically important for authors to acknowledge the limitations of their research and outline any efforts to mitigate these related issues. Such discussions give readers a sense of how certain issues might be addressed. Setting out clear research avenues, on the basis of the study's findings, also promotes theory development, elaboration, and testing.

### 4.3. Transparency and impact

Research that offers detailed, transparent descriptions of the data analysis appears more impactful, according to the number of citations (e.g., Bluhm et al., 2011), because transparency likely increases readers' confidence in replicating the procedures or adopting the results to inform their own research. To assess whether this claim is supported by our sample, we performed an analysis of covariance. Controlling for the year of publication, we find significant differences in citations across the three levels of data analysis transparency ($F_{2,\ 239} = 3.08$, $p < .05$). A pairwise comparison analysis, using Bonferroni correction, further shows that the highest level of transparency attracts more citations ($M = 28.35$, $SD = 2.62$), followed by the mostly transparent group ($M = 27.10$, $SD = 2.38$) and then the incomplete or missing group ($M = 19.47$, $SD = 2.83$). No significant difference arises in the number of citations received by articles in transparent and mostly transparent groups ($p = .727$), but these two groups receive significantly more citations than articles with the lowest level of transparency ($p = .022$ and $p = .040$, respectively).

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

### 5.1. Overall findings

Qualitative research is difficult and challenging; we hope our findings, detailing its presence in *IMM* over a decade, provide guidance to researchers continuing to conduct such important studies in business marketing management. In particular, a large majority of the studies we review used personal interviews to gather data; well over 80% of them were cross-sectional. Many authors did not justify their choice of method, possibly because they regard it as a common practice in business marketing management studies. An early career researcher can choose different methods though, to complement existing literature streams and possibly find new effects, rather than implicitly assuming there are only a few acceptable ways to conduct qualitative research for *IMM*. In the rest of this section, we examine the characteristics of good qualitative study, assess the data methodology and transparency of qualitative studies in *IMM*, and draw some conclusions about the trustworthiness of research results, along with directions for further research.

### 5.2. Characteristics of good, publishable qualitative study

High quality, publishable, qualitative academic studies in business marketing management research share several characteristics: (1) They frame the study according to extant literature and justify the use of qualitative research; (2) they justify their choice of a qualitative methodology; (3) the data collection and analysis are presented in a transparent and detailed manner; and (4) the authors provide evidence that the results are trustworthy (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013). How well do the qualitative studies published in *IMM* exhibit these characteristics, and where is there room for improvement?

#### 5.2.1. Justification of qualitative research

Fig. 4 details the impact of each research theme over the past decade, according to the number of articles (line chart) and mean number of citations they attract (bar chart). It is a rough assessment (e.g., does not account for author self-citations or citations in *IMM* versus other journals), but it offers some indication of impact, as measured by citations.

For example, networks and networking articles achieve a high count, at 46, but relatively few mean citations, at 23. Likewise, the selling and customers theme accounts for 50 articles but only generates 20 citations. In contrast, the business models theme has only 9 articles, which attract 44 citations. When considering the research themes this way, we note that networks and networking articles, as well as selling and customers articles, underperform (few citations relative to article count), whereas services and business models articles perform strongly (many citations relative to count).

Certain research themes attracted more qualitative research in 2013–2017: business relationships, innovations and new product development, and services. Others suffered decreasing attention during this second sub period (networks and networking, value creation, and interactions). There is not a one-to-one correspondence, but an apparent shift moves toward themes with higher relative citation counts (services) and away from those with low relative citation count (networks and networking). The pattern also does not hold in all cases (i.e., we would expect a trend toward more business models articles based on Fig. 4), yet it suggests that qualitative researchers focus at least some effort on themes that are gaining research attention. As noted in the Findings section, a majority of *IMM* qualitative studies generate or elaborate theory, whereas less than 3% of them test theory. Thus, we can infer that many recent qualitative studies (2013–2017) seek to generate or elaborate theory in growing research areas such as business services. A characteristic of a mature, multidisciplinary academic discipline is that topics gain research importance when new research questions are raised to advance theory. A few purely qualitative studies perform theory testing, but a mixed-method approach (generate research propositions qualitatively, then follow up with a quantitative test of the propositions) seems to be a promising option.

#### 5.2.2. Research design and justification of methodology

Most qualitative studies in *IMM* (almost four-fifths) use a case study design, and in 2013–2017, 16.4% of articles do not even mention a reason to justify this methodological choice. A researcher should choose a design and methodology appropriate to the research question being investigated, as well as consistent with his or her research philosophy (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012; Yin, 2014). Still, in many cases, better arguments for choosing the case study are needed, as are considerations of other research designs, such as grounded theory or action research, which might provide different insights. The lack of justification of the case study method might simply reflect the overwhelming number of qualitative studies that use it, such that case studies have come to be seen as the go-to qualitative methodology for studying business marketing management. But this suggestion also implies that some research opportunities might be overlooked, in that less common qualitative methodologies may provide complementary perspectives.

#### 5.2.3. Data collection and transparency of research methods and data analysis

For the most part, the *IMM* articles included in this study are transparent in describing their methods, but some articles fail to establish what kinds of observations they made or how. It is important to distinguish between passive observation (researcher takes no role) and participant observation (researcher actively participates or intervenes in discussions). In some cases, the nature of the observation can be inferred, but it is up to the researchers to make the point clearly. In addition, studies do not always explain the interview guide in enough detail. Readers should be able to find interview questions and ascertain how they were derived from theory (Kvale, 2007). The method should be presented in enough detail so that a reader could replicate the study. This provision is adequate in many cases (e.g., Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2013), but we offer the perhaps obvious prescription that all articles should achieve this level of transparency.

Our study also indicates that most articles are transparent about their data analysis but also find some room for improvement, such as in terms of full disclosures of the data recording and transcription methods used or the qualitative analyses employed. Readers should have a clear sense of how the qualitative data were analyzed and the findings were obtained. Some *IMM* articles offer excellent data analysis transparency and should be used as templates by researchers (e.g., Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012).

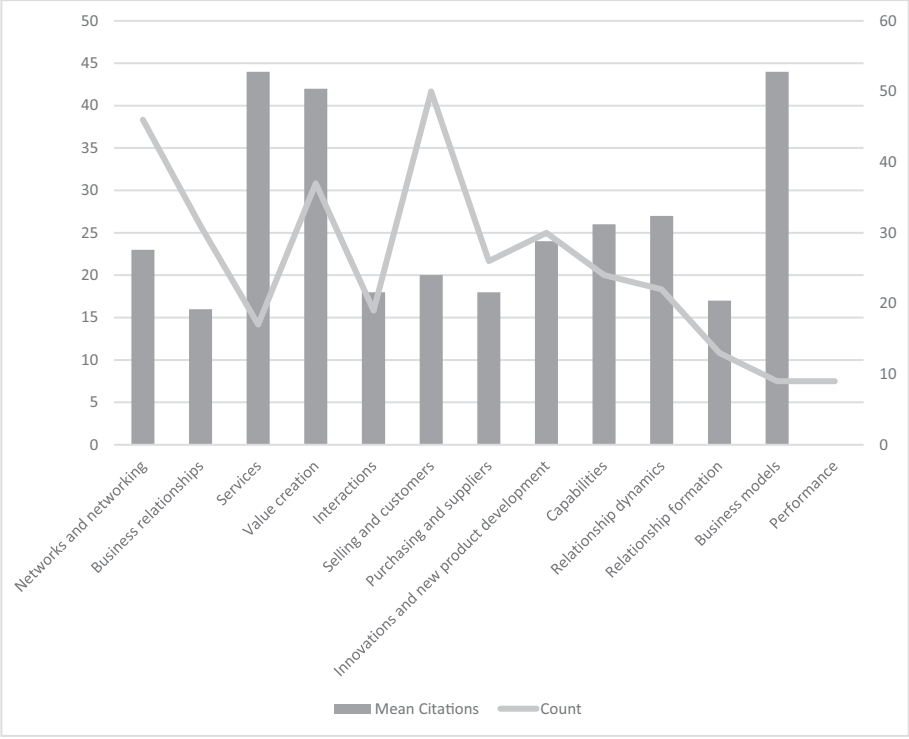


**Fig. 4.** Qualitative article counts and mean citations for each research theme.

#### 5.2.4. Trustworthiness of findings

Finally, for any study, the authors must make the case that the results of their qualitative research are trustworthy and impactful. To ensure rigorous contributions, they should adopt and describe appropriate data collection techniques and research design methods. In general, the data collection and design methods used in *IMM* qualitative articles are rigorous, but we again can identify some areas for improvement. In particular, the most commonly adopted data collection method is interviews (52.7%), whereas documentary/archival data appear in 25.9% of studies, and other methods are far less common. Interviews are helpful; they can collect rich, nuanced data from knowledgeable participants, so it is not surprising that this method dominates qualitative research in *IMM*. But adding observation and documentary/archival data can provide cross-validity and thereby improve the robustness of findings (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005). Furthermore, most qualitative studies collect data from one, or at most two, data sources (42.6% and 39.3%, respectively), and the average number of data sources has been trending downward. Cross-sectional qualitative research also is very common (84.4% of all articles), which is by no means unusual (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010), though it suggests the risk of some missed opportunities to identify dynamic changes in the variables or constructs under study. Even when they collect longitudinal data though, some studies do not outline the influences of the time variable conceptually or empirically. Thus, opportunities remain to gain insights, through expanded uses of longitudinal data.

As a note to junior researchers and doctoral students: When contemplating the use of qualitative research, multiple data sources and longitudinal designs will enhance their research efforts. They might consider adopting participant observation and collect more documentary/archival data, to help cross-validate interview data and enrich findings derived from interviews. These research design decisions can result in more robust results that increase the rigor and trustworthiness of their theoretical development efforts. Finally, as we show in Fig. 3, a few trends emerge over the ten-year period we study. We highlight the noticeable increase in the number of studies of business relationships, innovations and new product development, and services, whereas selling and customer topics remain popular. It is always a good idea for junior researchers to track such research trends, to identify and concentrate on the notions with the greatest publishing potential and avoid those that appear to be declining in relevance.

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