

Qualitative market research in Mena countries

The stimulus for this special issue arose from a conference held by Laboratory Interdisciplinary Gestion University Enterprises (LIGUE) in Tunisia in 2018. LIGUE is an interdisciplinary research laboratory and is the first in Management Sciences to be created in Tunisia in 1999 at the High Institute of Accountancy and Business Administration of the University of Manouba. The conference was organised in collaboration with the Academy of Marketing B2B SIG, Bournemouth University, UK, and the R&DM Research Center FSA – University Laval, Quebec. Such was the interest, commitment and contribution from the participants that the conference organisers made plans to build on the research being undertaken in north Africa and extend it to include the Middle East, i.e. Middle East and North African (MENA).

The MENA region is made up of 21 countries as follows: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Palestine and Yemen. The area has represented an under explored context in marketing research (Okazaki and Mueller, 2007; Al-Olayan and Karande, 2000) for a number of reasons: government barriers and the lack of priority given to research (Lages *et al.*, 2015; Balakrishnan, 2013); considerable regional diversity (Lages, Pfajfar and Shoham, 2015; Mellahi *et al.*, 2011); market/industry factors, i.e. access to data at industry level, survey barriers, quality of data/relevance of study, cost of gathering data and the availability of secondary data, publishing factors such as competency in English, reviewer bias and ethnocentricity of journals (Lages *et al.*, 2015; Balakrishnan, 2013). Scholars suggest that this paucity of research has hindered the development of new constructs, dissuaded the questioning of conventional thinking (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006) and thereby continues to limit the application of research developed in western countries to the MENA region. In addition, recent changes in the MENA region (for example, the Arab Spring and civil unrest) have generated a unique and specific context within which to conduct research (Balakrishnan, 2013). Hence, there is a pressing need for research in and about the MENA region (Lages *et al.*, 2015) that addresses and responds to its diversity and richness.

This special issue of *Qualitative Market Research - An International Journal* has attracted considerable interest resulting in high quality submissions. Consistent with the aims and practices of the journal, the usual double blind peer review process was followed. This rigorous adherence to good practice enables this special issue to make a substantial advancement to marketing research theory and knowledge based on qualitative research methods. The special issue thus illuminates research conducted in the MENA region through the development of innovative qualitative research methodologies, established methods modified to capture challenges in the region as well as theoretical or empirical studies that address region-specific themes. After a rigorous review process, the number of submissions in this issue consist of six studies that illuminate research using qualitative methods in MENA.

Content

The first paper in this special issue investigates, in micro-entrepreneurship via social technologies, the “connected woman” in Lebanon. The authors – Lichy, Farquhar and Kachour – show how theory on digitalisation in marketing is advanced through the use of



social technologies by women micro-entrepreneurs. Using data collected through conversations captured using WhatsApp, the study finds that these women's entrepreneurial activities fulfil personal and familial needs but also demonstrates an informal but deep understanding of how to exploit social networks, based on their own experiences.

In the second article, entitled "Shopping in a restrictive society: lessons from Saudi Arabia", Roper and Alkhalifah set out to understand utilitarian and hedonic motivations for the online shopping of fashion items where there are significant cultural restrictions. The researchers used a hijab index. This index was used as a proxy for measuring the strength of adherence to the restrictions imposed in Saudi Arabia and whether a woman changed her style when abroad. Both utilitarian and hedonic motivations for shopping were investigated. The findings show that utilitarian motivations for shopping online in a restrictive society included aligning with those restrictions or overcoming them. With regards to hedonic motivations, analysis revealed an enjoyment of flouting those very restrictions.

Situated in Tunisia, the third study explores the socio-cultural meanings of functional foods and how these meanings shape consumer preferences and practices. Using a two-part method comprising focus groups and then individual interviews, Lakhdar and Smaoui found that identity emerged both as a key social as well as a political issue. Oscillating between tradition and modernity, consumers in this former French colony sought identity through food preferences and practices.

The fourth study also located in Tunisia (see above for initial conference), seeks to identify the responses through which political trust could be repaired and to uncover the differences between two key stakeholder groups. The authors, Sghaier, Skandrani and Robson conduct a sequential mixed method study consisting of semi-structured interviews with citizens and politicians. This study was then followed by an analysis of data gathered from TV political talk shows over a three-year period. Analysis of these data, using a trust repair framework, revealed a new trust repair response of swiftness as well as short- and long-term responses. The study concludes that a swift response seemed best suited to address immediate political uncertainty.

Once more in Tunisia, the fifth investigation is concerned with uncovering factors that hinder the activities and ultimately the survival of not-for-profit organisations (NPOs). The research team of Skandrani, Kooli and Doudech organised semi-structured interviews with a sample of 32 NPO members. The interviews were designed so that participants could give voice to their views. Analysis of the interview data, which were conducted in French, revealed two categories of inhibitors. Endogenous inhibitors consisted of managerial conflict, illegal or foreign sources of funding and opportunistic behaviours. Exogenous factors were unethical practices and the media.

The final paper in this special issue addresses the role of tourist motivations on the image of a destination that has suffered a terrorist attack. Bringing together data from netnographic sources and in-depth interviews, Lakhoua, Temessek and Baccouche discovered tourist motivations for visiting the destination included compassion, curiosity and rational fatalism. They also discovered that reluctance to visit the destination stemmed from perceived insecurity as views that it might offer poor value. The researchers' use of complementary data sources elucidated the process of formation of the destination's image in the aftermath of the terrorist attack.

Contributions

This special issue makes several important contributions to qualitative research methods in marketing in the MENA region. Overall, the methods that are used are closely attuned to the

context of the research, such as an awareness of lifestyles, sensitivities to differing political climates and in the aftermath of terrorism. The special issue advances theory and practice in the value of social media as a means of data collection (King *et al.*, 2014; McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017), particularly where access to information is particularly challenging. The development of indices as an attempt to capture significant characteristics is an example of the use of proxies. Proxies in marketing research are not well represented (Soares *et al.*, 2007), and further research may usefully be conducted to find other applications in developing economies and diverse cultures. Longitudinal studies are unfortunately something of a rarity in business research (Perks and Roberts, 2013), largely attributable to the allied demands of time and financial resources of the research team involved. It is therefore very heartening to see Sghaier *et al.* adopt a temporal approach to their investigation. Such research is often appropriate where constructs are abstract, where theoretical foundations are nascent and the likelihood of alternative explanations high (Rindfleisch *et al.*, 2008), all of which suggest that longitudinal research has considerable potential in MENA.

Several of the published articles detail the use of mixed methods in realising their research aims. Although the mixed methods literature is often concerned with combining or bringing together qualitative and quantitative data (Erzberger and Prein, 1997; Mertens and Hesse-Biber, 2012), it may also include different methods within a methodological tradition (Farquhar *et al.*, 2020). In this tradition, Lakhader and Smaoui conducted focus groups, which broke into discussions followed by the use of projective techniques to elicit complementary data that uncovered identity as a significant factor in Tunisian consumption practices. Lakhoua *et al.* combined interviews with documents and netnographic data to unearth inhibiting factors in NPO activities. The use of multiple sources of data broadly increases confidence in the findings of qualitative research (see, for example, Hall and Rist, 1999) and so underpins the contribution to research. The study by Lichy *et al.* also uses two data sets, firstly, bounding and informing the research topic through a discussion with experts and then conducting conversations with the subjects of the study, that is women entrepreneurs.

The studies in this special issue suggest several avenues for further research. The ongoing challenges of informants, who may be unwilling or unable to provide information, may be addressed through creative approaches in developing data collection methods that encourage informants to share the information for the research. Although a “hopscotch” approach has been advised where players hop backwards, forwards or sideways; sometimes advancing and sometimes retreating (Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2016); using non-face-to-face methods, such as social media and netnography, has the potential to penetrate more deeply. It is also worth thinking about how reciprocity might be achieved within the MENA region and indeed across cultures.

The issue of language is fundamental to research being conducted in diverse areas such as MENA, where there are more than 60 languages spoken (<https://mena-languages.northwestern.edu>). Arabic is most widely spoken but even that is subject to strong regional variation, as mentioned in the study into Lebanese women entrepreneurs (Lichy *et al.*), where informants spoke Lebanese Arabic. In another study (Skandrani *et al.*), the interviews are conducted in French, which is widely used in business, (nordeatrade.com/en/explore-new-market/Tunisia) although Arabic is the official language of the country. Providing a translation so that meanings are commonly shared and then extracted during analysis requires advanced research skills, sensitised to linguistic and cultural nuances.

This special issue sheds significant light on marketing research in a region, which has been somewhat marginalised. Through the studies published, considerable insight has been gained on the context of marketing endeavours and research practices as described above. The ways in which the researchers have advanced knowledge in marketing reveals an eclectic approach to qualitative research adapted to fit the characteristics of the region.

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Further reading

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