

NUMBERS AND FEELINGS

Qualitative versus Quantitative Research

Measuring in Social Sciences is done through research in the same way that you do an experiment in a science laboratory. We examine by observing and investigating cases. Cases can be anything you like: People (Internet users, TV viewers, voters, members of a community, etc.) or professionals (managers, journalists, radio producers, creative workers, advertisers, etc.), 'texts' (movies, websites, news items, ads, tweets, Facebook posts, etc.), organisations (social movements, political parties, companies, etc.) ...and even things as big as countries.

Some measurements in social research are relatively straightforward such as socio-demographic variables like age, personal income and number of children in a household. Other concepts are less directly measurable such as people's liberalism, online engagement with news, media freedom or a star's power in Hollywood.

In order to be able to measure these concepts, we need to use indicators. These 'are categories for the organisation of ideas and observations' (e.g., racism; globalization; social mobility; job satisfaction; brand equity, etc.) An indicator is 'something that is devised or already exists and that is employed to stand for the concept we are measuring' (Bryman 2012) and using these indicators we can then devise research strategies which enable us to measure things that are sometimes thought of to be immeasurable because they are intangible.



KEY IDEAS

There are two main systems of strategy that are used: **Quantitative** which emphasises measurement in the analysis of data and **Qualitative** which emphasises words rather than numbers.

Quantitative approaches to researching people tend to use surveys and questionnaires whereas Quantitative approaches to researching media content uses quantitative content analysis. Quantitative researchers aim to 1) describe a phenomenon (e.g. % of people sharing news online via social media in different countries; 2) explain what causes it (e.g. is age or gender a factor? Do country-level factors have an impact?) 3) generalise the findings to the whole population (through statistical tests of significance). Quantitative research typically investigates a large number of cases and works with measurement definitions of each concept (or variable). The number of cases used in a sample depends on the size of the population being investigated.

Qualitative approaches tend to investigate smaller numbers of cases and work with looser conceptual definitions. The analysis of the data is non-statistical and often offers in-depth accounts dealing with the nuances and complexities of what is being explored. The insights discovered are specific and non-generalisable.

Your choice of strategy is defined by the research question you are trying to find the answer to.

KEY READINGS

Berger, A. A. (2000). *Media and communication research methods: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative approaches.* London: Sage.

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Available from: bit.ly/2LQewLS.

Jensen, K. B. (2002). *A handbook of media and communication research: Qualitative and quantitative methodologies.* London: Routledge.

ACTIVITIES

1. Think about a star's power - How would you go about measuring this concept? What indicators would you employ?

You may want to think about the following:

- i. Do you take into account the top star actor only or the top three stars in a film?
- ii. Do you take into account only star actors or also star directors?
- iii. What indicator are you going to employ that stands for an actor's 'star power'? Perhaps you would count the number of Oscar nominations or number of visits to IMDB pages or even the average salary per film?
- iv. Can you think of any problems with any of these questions?

2. Think about measurements of freedom – how do organisations such as Reporters without Borders (<https://rsf.org/en>) measure media freedom?

Think about the following:

- i. What are the problems/issues with this approach to measuring media freedom?
- ii. Are the measurements subjective? Objective? Do they demonstrate bias?
- iii. Can you think of other ways of measuring a country's media freedom?
- iv. Can you think of and research a country that has less media freedom than the U.K.? Why is this so?

3. Think about parents' attitudes to gaming on-line? How would you go about exploring this as a research topic?