INTRODUCTION

In these current years, the debate about the relative advantages between qualitative and quantitative research has gained the considerable impulsion (Bryman, 1984). In general, quantitative research focus on the measuring of things that can be counted by using predetermined categories that can be treated as interval or ordinal data and subjected to statistical analysis (Skinner, Tagg, & Holloway, 2000). On the other hand qualitative method is a research approach which less structured and more intensive than standardized questionnaire-based interview (Aaker, Kumar, & Day, 2001). In addition, it is also suggested that qualitative research is focused on the experience of people and the meanings they place on the events, processes and structures of their normal social setting (Skinner, Tagg & Holloway, 2000). Hence, it is believed that qualitative approach provides a greater flexibility approach rather a quantitative method.

The Nature of Qualitative Research

While the concepts and the application of qualitative techniques have been largely acknowledged, (de Ruyter & Scholl, 1998) claimed that just small number of marketing research is conducted in the perspective of qualitative research. Accordingly some of reasons proposed to explain the less number of qualitative marketing researches. First of all, it is explained that the techniques of qualitative research are less founded in scientific tradition. It happens since qualitative research is more aimed at generating new hypothesis. Secondly, since the end of result of qualitative research is determined by the researcher’s personality thus it is difficult to describe qualitative research. Finally, qualitative research commonly integrated with all phases of company research project.

Currently, the role of qualitative research has been becoming more significant in the perspective of marketing research. Several marketing studies have been conducted by using qualitative research (Ford, Bach, & Fottler, 1997; Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000). However, Skinner, Tagg & Holloway (2000), claimed that in the practical way, some business researchers who will do a research have mainly affected by positivist paradigm emphasizing on quantitative approach. Thus, Catterall (1998) proposed that the future of qualitative market research is going to depend on the understanding of
Within the context of marketing research, qualitative approach provides a view into questions that drive the way people think about a certain subject and why they think that (de Ruyter & Scholl, 1998). In addition, it is also proposed that the uses of qualitative research in marketing will offer an answer regarding some problems in the areas of strategic marketing, consumer decision making, customer satisfaction, communication, idea generation, new product development and market research.

Although different in nature, there are some areas of qualitative and quantitative approaches that can be collaborated. Catterall (1998) suggested that qualitative and quantitative approach might be collaborated in terms of their research domain, role, education and origins. Furthermore, in this current day, some marketing studies combine those approach in a study where qualitative approach is used to gather the basic knowledge of problem and quantitative approach for justifying the result of qualitative approach. Hence it is obvious that although it has some differences, qualitative and quantitative approaches can be integrated in the frame of marketing research.

The Roles of Action Research in Marketing Research

To date, several techniques are used in qualitative research (Kent, 2007). For example, depth interview, focus group, projective technique and action research. In general, de Ruyter & Scholl (1998) suggested that the qualitative techniques can be classified into elicitation techniques and analysis techniques or model. In detail, it is explained that elicitation techniques refer into the techniques that obtain certain responses from respondents such as primary reactions, unconscious feelings, and association in images. The specific technique to do elicitation approach is photosort. Meanwhile, analysis techniques are an approach which tries to portray the reaction of consumer in broader context.

Nowadays, one of qualitative technique receiving high concern from both scholars and academia is action research. According to Lewin (1973) cited from Sulaksana (2004), action research is a research framework to solve the problem where there is an
interaction between researcher and client. Furthermore, Davison, Martinsons & Kock (2004), suggested that the focus of action research is to solve the problems of organization through the intervention while at the same time it also contributes to the knowledge.

Although action research has been widely known as a qualitative research approach, some scholars still argue that it is unscientific and it produces research of mediocre quality with unvalidated findings (Gronhaug & Olson, 1999). In addition, the label of action research is rather broad, is often left undefined, or it is used in different ways (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). For that reason, it is believed that there is a need to clarify the ambiguities surrounding this approach.

Based on his point of view, Lewin suggested that action research was meant as scientific research. In detail, he claimed that there are two major concerns of social science research namely general law and the diagnosis of specific situation. Furthermore, he also proposed that general law knowledge is not enough to make improvements, hence situational knowledge is needed.

Theoretically, there are four fundamental elements of action research project Perry & Gummesson (2004). They are:

1. A group of people who use spiraling cycles of activities that cover planning, acting, observing and reflecting on the current situation
2. the trial to improve workgroup processes of action
3. the help to solve complex, practical problems about which little is known, and
4. producing at least one report regarding the findings

In terms of doing cycles activities, there is an interaction between researchers and clients. Argyris & Schon (1974) cited from Gronhaug & Olson (1999) suggested that the interaction between client and researchers is caused by the different knowledge owned by those parties. In detail, it is explained that clients are the problem owner and they have experience-based knowledge while researchers’ knowledge are based on theory-based knowledge.
While, the interaction between client and action researchers is a main characteristic of action research, it should be noted that the degree of client involvement within research process is not equal. In other words, the degree of involvement varies tremendously (Gronhaug & Olson, 1999). In addition, it can be illustrated that the client who has high competency will actively involve in the research process compare with the client who does not have high competency.

In these current days, traditional experimental design is recognized as an ideal research technique. Gronhaug & Olson (1999) suggested that the manipulation of treatment which is commonly done by classical experiment is able to identify covariation between and time order of cause and effect, hence it is claimed that classical experiment is a strong research design. Since it is recognized as a vigorous research design, this method is commonly used as a baseline for evaluating other research design. Thus, in order to evaluate the merits of action research, the classical experiment design will be the benchmark.

In general, it is widely acknowledged that the traditional research such as classical experiment emphasizes on the valid knowledge. Hence, in terms of determining causal relationship these following criteria will be the guidelines:

1. concomitant variations
2. cause should precede effect
3. alternative causal effect should be ruled out

Based on these guidelines there are several dimensions can be derived in order to test the causal explanation, such as

1. the control toward treatment
2. covariation between cause and effect
3. time order between cause and effect
4. access to control group, and
5. randomization

Using these dimensions as a departure points in terms comparing action research with classical experiment, Gronhaug & Olson (1999) proposed some significant differences. It is claimed that classical experiment might fill all of these dimensions
while action research only partly control over treatment, restricted possibilities to
examine covariation and limited opportunity to determine the time order of cause and
effect. In addition, action research essentially different with classical experiment in
the context of access to control group and the possibility to randomization.

However, if the benchmark between action research and classical experiment uses the
key characteristics of action research, it is also suggested that action research and
classical experiment is different in nature. For example, among five action research’s
characteristics such as focus on real-life problems, collaboration between researchers
and the client, focuses on change, longitudinal and multiple research activities
classical experiment just similar with action research in the context of focusing on
change. For that reason, it is obvious that these research approaches are not similar.

Although action research is different in nature with traditional research design,
Sorenson (1992) cited from Gronhaug & Olson (1999) suggested that it still can be
conducted within the framework of traditional research with emphasize on valid
knowledge and documentation of action outcomes.

Based on the discussion about the nature of qualitative research in general and action
research in particular, it is believed that there are some challenges faced by the
application of action research in the perspective of marketing research. Gronhaug &
Olson (1998) claimed that the key challenge is to determine whether the observed or
assumed relationships are true, which is commonly neglected in many reported
studies based on action research. In addition, since action research involves multiple
research activities there is a little doubt whether this method might produce important
and useful knowledge of people in context.

In sum, it is believed that action research is one of robust method to do a qualitative
research. However, it should clarify its function and position among qualitative
research methods. In addition, since there are some challenges faced, it is obvious that
the further discussion regarding action research is needed.


