The Importance of Qualitative and Phenomenological Research Methods in Business Studies

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Abstract

An ongoing conflict exists between theory and practice where scholars attempt to maintain practical relevance to their academic studies and business practitioners strive to apply appropriate theory to their businesses (Brower, Abolafia, & Carr, 2000). Most current business research is based on predictive Quantitative rather than exploratory Qualitative methodology (Carrera-Fernández, Guàrdia-Olmos, & Peró-Cebollero, 2014; Molina-Azorin, 2012; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016). A growing emphasis is placed on the value of interpretive Qualitative research in providing more insightful and holistic results (Charmaz, 2014; Iamratanakul, 2017; Madill & Gough, 2008; O'Neil & Koekemoer, 2016). Conklin (2007) and (Gibson & Hanes (2003) highlight the significance of Phenomenological research methodology, in its capacity to understand the complexity of human experiences and its potential to bridge the gap between Qualitative researchers and practitioners. Management scholars are increasingly utilizing Phenomenology to reach new insights in areas of decision making based on in-depth human understanding rather than rational and logical processes (Gill, 2014).

Keywords: *Qualitative Research, Quantitative Research, Interpretive Research, Phenomenology, Human Experience, Business Research, Praxis Gap.*

Introduction

In the dynamic applied field of business, management practitioners are often too focused on daily endeavors to keep track of market changes, best practices, trends, and customer motivations, rendering business research "an investment not a cost" for most businesses (Koco, 2003, p. 34). Business professionals utilize research as a systemic and methodological investigation and inquiry process and a source of information vital

for their decision-making practice (Miliken, 2001). Research of the various sub-disciplines of business serves multiple purposes including: 1) Critiquing the effectiveness of current business practices; 2) Helping to improve how business is conducted; 3) Providing guidance to practitioners on methods to achieve organizational goals by finding solutions to issues of "practical relevance and value to manager(s) in organization(s)" (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, p. 27); 4) Inventing and developing novel business practices (Hevner, March, Park, & Ram, 2004); and 5) Examining non-profit organizational and business objectives of social and environmental impact (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Klein, & Brooke, 2008; Myers & Klein, 2011; Stahl, 2008). Ongoing tension exists between theory and practice where business practitioners strive to apply appropriate theory to their businesses and scholars attempt to maintain practical relevance to their academic studies and recommendations (Brower, Abolafia, & Carr, 2000).

Business Research Design

Methodological research frameworks consist of three epistemological orientations, research aiming for: 1) Explanation and prediction, studied within the *Positivist* research paradigm; 2) Interpretation and understanding, studied within the *Interpretive* paradigm; and 3) Intervention and change, studied within the *Pragmatist* paradigm (Braa & Vidgen, 1999). Research paradigms are "particular worldviews that constitute a researcher's values, beliefs and methodological assumptions" (O'Neil & Koekemoer, 2016, p. 3). The proper selection of a research methodology determines the most appropriate approach for obtaining comprehensive knowledge about a particular problem, thus ensuring quality and accuracy of the study results (Creswell, 1994; He & Van de Vijver, 2016; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

Most empirical research of existing business practices is conducted in the *Positivist* and *Interpretive* research paradigms (Venable, 2011). Logical *Positivists* test hypothetic-deductive generalizations using Quantitative methods, seeking explanations and laws of cause and effect. Their main objective is to identify patterns or relationships, thus tend to simplify study elements to facilitate data collection, testing, analysis, pattern deduction, and acceptance or rejection of conclusions. *Interpretivists* attempt to understand phenomena or human experiences in a given context using Qualitative and Naturalistic approaches, based on an Inductive and Holistic form. They seek to establish reasons and actions that lead to a given pattern of behavior, insisting that all events are inter-dependent, and that statistical correlations and patterns are valuable only when explained by people's reasons for actions (Amaratunga, Baldry, Sarshar, & Newton, 2002). Table 1 contrasts *Positivist* and *Interpretive* research paradigms in terms of ideology, methodology and results interpretation according to Weber (2004).

Table 1 Positivist and Interpretivist Research Approaches		
Methodological Assumptions About	Positivism	Interpretivism
Ontology	Person (researcher) and reality are separate.	Person (researcher) and reality are inseparable (life-world).
Epistemology	Objective reality exists beyond the human mind.	Knowledge of the world is intentionally constitutes through a person's lived experience.
Research Object	Research object has inherent qualities that exist independently of the researcher.	Research object is interpreted in light of meaning structure of person's (researcher's) lived experience.
Method	Statistics, Content Analysis	Hermeneutics, Phenomenology
Theory of Truth	Correspondence theory of truth: one-to-one mapping between research statements and reality.	Truth as intentional fulfillment: interpretations of research object match lived experience of research object.
Validity	Certainty: data truly measures reality.	Defensible knowledge claims.
Reliability	Replicability: research results can be replicated.	Interpretative Awareness: researchers recognize and address implications of their subjectivity.
Source: Weber (2004, p. iv)		

The objective of research in applied disciplines like business supersedes explanation or evaluation of extant phenomena, rendering other research paradigms often more adequate for addressing such objectives (Venable, 2011). Such paradigms include *Pragmatism*, focusing on the interaction between knowledge and action, and is mostly concerned with change and intervention, often referred to as *Action Research*. While Interpretivism and Pragmatism share an orientation for understanding, Interpretivism regards understanding as the main research value, while Pragmatism considers constructive knowledge as an instrument to the change of existence (Cole, Purao, & Sein, 2005; Dewey, 1931; Iivari & Venable, 2009). Table 2 demonstrates the difference between Interpretivism and Pragmatism in terms of ontology, focus and methodology according to Goldkuhl (2012).

	Pragmatism	Interpretivism
Table 2 **Pragmatism vs. Interpretivism**		
Ontology	Symbolic realism	Constructivism
Empirical Focus	Actions and changes	Beliefs (socially constructed cognition)
Type of knowledge	Constructive knowledge	Understanding
Role of knowledge	Useful for action	Interesting
Type of Investigation	Inquiry	Field study
Data generation	Data through assessment and intervention	Data through interpretation
Role of researcher	Engaged in change	Engaged in understanding
Source: Goldkuhl (2012, p. 12)		

Other relevant paradigms include *Design Science*, adopted for studying the development of new business practices, rather than examining existing ones; and *Critical Research*, used to study organizational practices and goals other than profit, such as societal impact, business ethics, and sustainability (Venable, 2011).

The Importance of Qualitative Approaches in Business Research

In current business research, the number of Qualitative studies used to investigate a phenomenon and develop an understanding about main issues, meanings, actors, and events is limited compared to the amount of Quantitative research conducted. This is mainly due to management researchers relying on traditional sciences such as economics, psychology and sociology that utilize Quantitative methods for understanding phenomena (Hill & McGowan, 1999); as well as evident skepticism amongst scholars about the validity and reliability of Interpretivism (Carrera-Fernández, Guàrdia-Olmos, & Peró-Cebollero, 2014; Molina-Azorin, 2012; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016). However, a growing emphasis is placed on the value of a researcher's own perceptions and interpretations in exploratory Qualitative research in providing more insightful and holistic results (Charmaz, 2014; Madill & Gough, 2008; O'Neil & Koekemoer, 2016). A researcher's neglect of the value of Interpretivist Qualitative in business studies may result in that "the empirical and theoretical elements are not always engaged in a productive interplay", yielding insufficient results (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2013, p. 2). Deeper understanding of social phenomena "helps in the development and refinement of a hypothesis that can be verified by a positivist approach to develop its significance or cause effect relationship" (Maqsood, 2006, p. 93).

While both Quantitative and Qualitative research explore phenomena (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Quantitative research involves systematic investigation of phenomena through statistics, analytic software tools and mathematics, and is recommended for: 1) Analysis of large volumes of Quantitative data; 2) Verification of hypotheses and testing of theories; 3) Data that can be collected via simple questionnaires; and 4) Quantification and comparison of obtained data (Singh, 2006; Martin & Bridgmon, 2012). Alternatively, Qualitative research is a naturalistic complex approach that provides answers for what, how, when and where research questions, and explores phenomena by more flexible non-mathematical analysis of experiences, behaviors, and interactions (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2010). Qualitative research is adopted for: 1) Studying complex methodological frameworks and behaviors; 2) Testing methodological frameworks in real environments; 3) Exploring parameters, interactions and correlations; 4) Studying new areas; 5) Filtration of choices and ideas; 6) Developing new methodological frameworks; 7) Situations where there is uncertainty about concepts, factors and phases under consideration; and 8) Interpretation of factors and phases of research (Baker, 2001; Themistocleous, Basias, & Morabito, 2015). Brower, Abolafia, & Carr (2000, p. 366) summarize the basic differences in assumptions between Qualitative and Quantitative methodologies as demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3 Qualitative vs Quantitative Research		
Assumption	Qualitative Approaches	Quantitative Approaches
Ontology	Multiple realities from participants'' local, every day, emergent experiences	Singular, objective reality; static abstractions (data) that correspond to real life
Epistemology	Researcher interacts with participants; meaning is value relevant	Detached, objective researcher
Value bases	Participants and researchers are unavoidably value laden	Value-free, unbiased data
Rhetorical style	Personal voice (singular and plural); often in present tense	Impersonal voice; past tense
Source: Brower, Abolafia, & Carr (2000, p. 366)		

Kamasak, Kar, Yavuz, & Baykut (2017, pp. 25,27) describe the most important approaches for data collection and analysis in Quantitative and Qualitative research as shown in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

Table 4 Data Collection and Analysis Approaches Used in Quantitative Research		
Data Collection and Analysis Approach	Research Questions	Key Features
Laboratory Experiments	How, why	Identification of the precise relationships between chosen variables in a designed laboratory situation. Uses quantitative analysis and allows intensive study of a small number of variables.
Field Experiments	How, why	Extension of laboratory experiments into real-life situations. However, it is often difficult to find organizations prepared to be experimented upon.
Archival Analysis	Who, what, where, how many/much	Based upon the quantitative and qualitative analysis of archival records to describe the incidence or prevalence of a phenomenon, or to be predictive about certain outcomes.
Forecasting Future Research	What, how much	Providing insights into likely future events or impacts, these studies use techniques that include regression analysis, time series analysis, or the Delphi method and change analysis. They attempt to deal with the impact of change, but must deal with complexity and changing relationships between variables under study.
Simulation, Game and Role Playing	What, how	Used to study situations that are otherwise difficult to analyze by simulating the behavior of the system by the generation or introduction of random variables.
Surveys	Who, what, where, how many/ much	Questionnaires, interviews and observation are used to obtain data on the practices, situations or views of a sample of a particular population. Surveys allow large numbers of variables to be analyzed quantitatively, but do not provide insight into underlying causes.
Source: Kamasak, Kar, Yavuz, & Baykut (2017, p. 25)		

Table 5 Data Collection and Analysis Approaches Used in Qualitative Research		
Data Collection and Analysis Approach	Research Questions	Key Features
Case study	How, why, what	Case studies can either be explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive, in all cases focusing on contemporary phenomenon in real-life settings. They allow the capture and analysis of many variables, but are generally restricted to a defined event or organization, making generalization difficult.
Archival analysis	Who, what, where, how many/much	Based upon the quantitative and qualitative analysis of archival records to describe the incidence or prevalence of a phenomenon, or to be predictive about certain outcomes.
History	How, why	Explanatory studies that deal with operational links over time.
Subjective, Argumentative	What	A creative, free-flowing, unstructured approach to theory building that is based upon opinion and speculation. A subjective approach that places considerable emphasis upon the perspective of the researcher, its objective is the creation of new ideas and insights.
Action research	What to do, how, why	This is applied research where there is an attempt to obtain results and benefits of practical value to groups with whom the researcher is allied, while at the same time maintaining a holistic perspective and adding to theoretical knowledge. The underlying philosophy is that the presence of the researcher will change the situation under investigation.
Grounded theory	What, how	A structured approach to forming and eliciting theory grounded in data.
Descriptive, Interpretive	What, how, why	Based upon the philosophy that phenomena are the essence of experience, this form of research seeks to represent reality using an in-depth self-validating process in which presuppositions are continually questioned, and the understanding of the phenomena under study is refined. The approach allows the development of cumulative knowledge by incorporating the thorough review of the literature and past research as well as the current investigation. This encourages additional insight, and well as ensuring that subsequent research builds on past endeavors.
Source: Kamasak, Kar, Yavuz, & Baykut (2017, p. 27)		

Wide in-depth understanding of different factors, stages and multiple inter-linked fields is vital for the wide-open under-defined field of management and business strategy (Iamratanakul, 2017), rendering Qualitative Interpretive research highly appropriate as a research methodology, through its conceptualization and theory building capacity (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Gummesson, 2000; Yin R. , 2011). Qualitative research in business includes the study of unfamiliar, complex business situations with ambiguous cause-effect relationships; situations that require prescriptive direction; and where interpretations resulting from several points of view are valuable within the workplace, market, or industry (Parington, 2002).

The Role of Qualitative Research in International Business

In the complex scattered over-distance emergent field of International Business, using reductionist large-scale, cross-sectional research methods in the absence of properly developed theory is considered inappropriate. Rather, focus should be on understanding the complex institutional, cultural, and organizational contexts brought about by globalization and transactions across international boundaries, that can be achieved via Qualitative research (Birkinshaw, Brannen, & Tung, 2011). Research of Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) necessitates the understanding of informal processes, economic development patterns, foreign investment policies and internationalization differences that influence the success of MNCs across countries (Andersson, Forsgren, & Holm, 2007). With the growing movement of talent across international boundaries, more dynamic and robust models such as those of Qualitative approaches, are essential for understanding the interaction between global leaders, foreign managers, and host country employees (Tung, 2008). Further, Qualitative research is useful when conducting research in developing and underdeveloped markets, constituting at least two-thirds of the world's population and referred to as the Bottom of Pyramid (BOP) (Mahajan & Banga, 2006; Prahalad, 2010; Viswanathan, Sridharan, & Ritchie, 2009), due to its ability to capture the challenges of studying BOP consumers and observing their participation in activities in their real-life situations, providing behavioral and attitude insights (Doz, 2011).

Phenomenological Research in Business

Phenomenology is the study of anything that appears to a person in their conscious experience, referred to as a "Phenomenon" (Moran, 2000). It is a powerful tool in understanding human experiences within management studies and organizational research such as those related to the scope of work of Human Resource professionals (Conklin, 2007; Gibson & Hanes, 2003). Management is no longer regarded as simply a rational set of activities and functions that managers perform, such as planning, leading,

organizing and controlling (Mukhi, Hampton, & Barnwell, 1988), but similar to leadership, is a combination of highly complex interpersonal and relational activities that are essential to the development of the human side of the enterprise (De Santo & Moss, 2004; Ehrich & Knight, 1998). Phenomenological methodology with its ability to "understand the complexity of human experience and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of participants' experiences" plays a significant role in management activities, such as coaching, transformation, team emotion and professional development (Gibson & Hanes, 2003, p. 201). Several types of Phenomenological research exist with specific interpretations of assumptions, objectives, and analytical steps for application as described in Table 6. A growing number of management scholars are utilizing Phenomenology to reach new insights in areas of decision making based on factors other than rational and logical processes, such as emotion (Gill, 2014).

Table 6 A Typology of Phenomenological Methodologies				
	Descriptive phenomenology (Husserlian)		Interpretive phenomenology (Heideggerian)	
	Sanders' phenomenology	*Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method*	*Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology*	*Benner's interpretive phenomenology*	*Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis*
Disciplinary origin	Organization Studies	Psychology	Pedagogy	Nursing	Psychology
Methodology as	Technique	Scientific method	Poetry	Practice	Craft
Aims	To make explicit the implicit structure (or essences) and meaning of human experiences	To establish the essence of a particular phenomenon	To transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence	To articulate practical, everyday understandings and knowledge	To explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world
Participants (sampling)	3-6	At least 3	1 or more	Until new informants reveal no new findings	Unspecified
Key concepts	- Bracketing (epoché) - Eidetic reduction - Nomematic / noetic correlates	- Bracketing (epoché) - Eidetic reduction - Imaginative variation - Meaning units	- Depthful writing - Orientation - Thoughtfulness	- Background - Exemplars - Interpretive teams - Paradigm cases	- Double hermeneutic - Idiographic - Inductive
Applications in organization studies	Kram and Isabella (1985)	McClure and Brown (2008)	Gibson (2004)	Yakhlef and Essén (2012)	Murtagh et al. (2011)
Source: Gill (2014, p. 122)				

Contrasting Phenomenology with Other Qualitative Techniques

Gill (2014) contrasts the use of Phenomenology with other Qualitative methodologies such as Narrative inquiry, Autoethnography, Template Analysis, and Ethnomethodology within business research as demonstrated in Table 7.

Table 7 Contrasting Phenomenology with Other Qualitative Techniques
Narrative inquiry
Similar to Phenomenology, it explores stories of specific event of an individual's lived experience (Chase, 2000), but ''takes as its object of investigation the story itself'' (Riessman, 2002, p. 218), without establishing a connection sequence between what participants say and their experiences (Chapman & Smith, 2002)
Autoethnography
Described as ''an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)'' (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273), relying on individuals "writing their own experiences as a story" not the researcher accounting for others' experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737)
Template Analysis
Described as thematic analysis of Qualitative data (King, 2004), typically starting with a predefined set of codes identifying themes strongly expected to be relevant to the analysis (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000)
Ethnomethodology
Also referred to as Phenomenological Sociology, refers to the study of the way ordinary individuals develop a stable social world through everyday actions (Garfinkel, 2011)
Source: Barsoum (2021)

Critiquing the Use of Qualitative Research in Business

Qualitative research has been criticized for its lack of clarity, justification for combinations of methods used, adequate researcher training, precision and validity measures, sampling guidelines, and relevance to practicing professionals; as well as its methodological restrictions, weak reliability and data constancy, impossibility of reproduction, proneness to researcher bias, lengthiness of the process and negative bias of journal editors and reviewers (Conboy, Fitzgerald, & Mathiassen, 2012; Decrop, 1999; Goulding, 1999; Santiago-Delefosse, 2002; Sharts-Hopko, 2002). Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley (2005) argue that judging the quality of Qualitative research aiming to answer broad questions should not be based on predictors intended to describe, predict, and
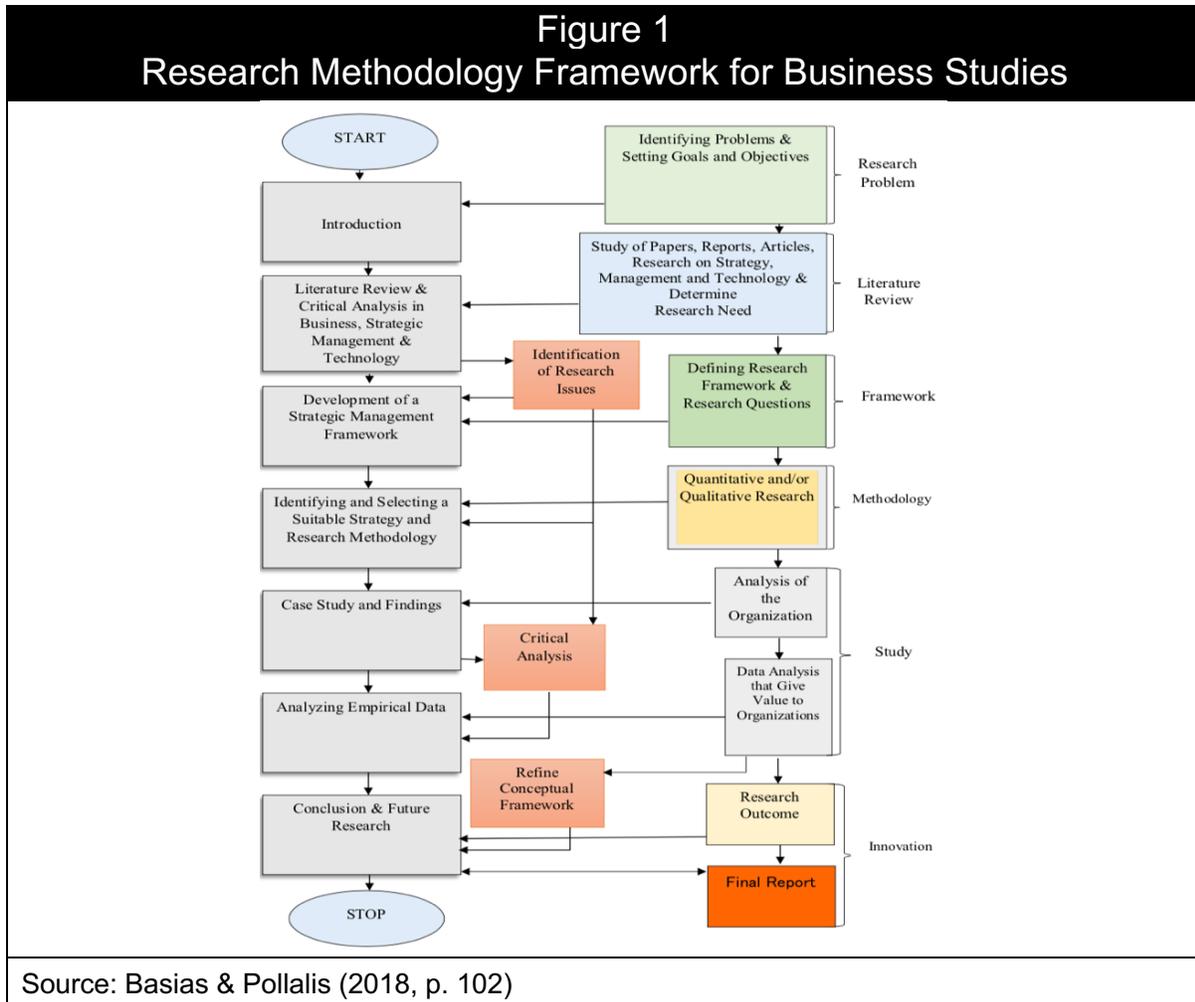
verify empirical relationships in more controlled settings of Quantitative studies. Guba & Lincoln (1989) suggest more meaningful indicators of Qualitative research quality such as trustworthiness and credibility. Van De Ven (2007) suggests Engaged Scholarship as "a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) in studying complex problems" to bridge the gap between Qualitative researchers and practitioners (p. 209).

The Value of Quantitative Approaches in Business Research

Despite the value of Interpretivist Qualitative research in business studies, Positivist Quantitative research methods prove highly appropriate in situations when: 1) factual data is required to answer research questions; 2) probability of opinions, attitudes, views, and preference needs to be assessed; 3) research problems are unambiguous; and most importantly 4) variables can be identified and linked to defined hypothesis to be tested via statistical tools. The testing of hypotheses developed from clearly defined frameworks with variables and expected correlations and relationships, results in simplified, factual, unbiased, comparable, generalizable data that is easily comprehended by management professionals, and can help in inferencing upon general populations, thus facilitating decisions and predictions necessary for business success (Kovacs, Morgan, Levine, & McCrann, 2012; Martin & Bridgmon, 2012; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016).

Mixed Research Methods as an Approach to Business Research

Owing to the distinct benefits of Qualitative and Quantitative research, it has been recommended that the two approaches be used as complementary approaches to support each other rather than be used mutually exclusively or in competition (Wilson, 1982), achieving in "triangulation in action" (Jick, 1979, p. 602). To examine key phases and factors across disciplines and in applied fields such as business and management, mixed approaches may prove adequate; where Qualitative methods are used to identify, understand and analyze key strategic management phases and factors in novel research topics, and Quantitative methods are used to measure and prioritize the importance of each strategic factor (Basias & Pollalis, 2018). Basias & Pollalis (2018) advocate for a framework, illustrated in Figure 1, for the development, examination, and testing of other Strategic Management Studies.

Figure 1
Research Methodology Framework for Business Studies

Source: Basias & Pollalis (2018, p. 102)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Business is a highly complex field, with untapped areas that can benefit from proper methodological research. In-depth understanding of human experiences and phenomena allows for more engaged research and proper business analysis and planning. An Interpretivist Qualitative Phenomenological approach is highly recommended for insightful exploration of business issues, upon which theories and models can be developed and tested via Positivist Quantitative methods, availing predictions, and inferences necessary for informed decision-making. This triangulation of research methodology aims to bridge the praxis gap between theory and business practice and allows scholarly business research to result in more relevant and reliable practical recommendations.

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