

## FAQ 1: When is it better to do qualitative or quantitative research?

### What's the issue?

To some extent all questions may be approached either quantitatively or qualitatively. It all depends on the chief goal. Are you interested in a systematic approach, in order to produce comparable, generalisable data, or do you want to produce a "thick" description of a particular case/group/situation/context? Each option involves different kinds of planning, which may best be followed by a particular research design. Nevertheless, comparing data on Q systematic way

population, or testing theories with a hypothesis. This is particularly information extensively within and from a specific population or between configured within particular geographical or socio-spatial units, such as

A qualitative approach is best for exploring a subject about which you the opposite reason, when you want

possibility of making comparisons and enabling generalizations. This explains the popularity of surveys. But they also present some limitations. The number of questions is always limited, not to mention their scope, and some subjects may be difficult to translate into “closed questions”, especially if dealing with sensitive subjects or when searching for meaning and understanding.

### Example of a qualitative study: EU NET ADB

The EU NET ADB project used a qualitative approach to study what they labelled as “internet addictive behaviour” to examine behavioural patterns variously described in the literature as, for example, internet addiction, internet abuse, internet dependence, compulsive internet use, excessive internet use, pathological and problematic internet use, and internet use disorder (see Dreier *et al.*, 2012). Given the dynamic nature of internet use the researchers thought that a qualitative approach was appropriate, building on the view that methodologies employed to examine internet use along with its ensuing consequences should keep pace with the continuous transformation of digital landscape and be regularly revised accounting for new forms of internet use and functions. The researchers came to the conclusion that as the phenomenon of internet addictive behaviour was relatively “new”, and no formal theory or formal diagnostic criteria had been developed, grounded theory was a good fit for this process-oriented exploratory study.

### Examples of combined approaches

Only at an abstract (or purist) epistemological level are quantitative and qualitative approaches likely to be presented as completely incompatible. In most cases, a combination of methods may prove to be more useful. Under different research circumstances both strategies can be (and usually are) combined. In fact, quantitative and qualitative mean different things in different situations. The actual form this combination will take depends, on the one hand, on the objectives and, on the other hand, on research development.

The quantitative SAFT study used data resulting from “free” qualitative methodology (see Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004) to formulate questions and to provide explanations and insights for the interpretation of the quantitative data.

In the project Children and their Changing Media Environment (Livingstone, 2002; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001), a qualitative study preceded a quantitative one, which proved to be very helpful when interpreting the quantitative data (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001); the same happened with the UK Children Go Online research project. As the authors of the study noticed, “Though often insightful in suggesting themes or trends, qualitative research is best complemented by quantitative research in order to judge the scale and significance of the findings” (Livingstone & Bober, 2004).

### References and further resources

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