
UNIT 11 CASE STUDY METHOD

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11.0 INTRODUCTION

You have read in the previous units that research in mass communication is a twentieth century phenomenon. From effects studies to textual analysis to critical discourse analysis to semiotics we have a wide spectrum of research methods applied to every communication situation. The case study is one such qualitative research method which is flexible and accepts all methods of data collection. Case studies may use findings of content analysis but they focus on the overall situation of an event, institution or phenomenon. Case studies may use survey findings as part of their data but it is not survey research per se. The most suitable analogy is that of a doctor maintaining a case history of a patient for a specific therapeutic treatment, drawn from specific cases or general experience. A case study may have historical perspectives in it but it is not a complete historical research. It may use statistics but not a quantitative study to the core. Individuals, events and institutions form the basis of case studies to a large extent. The method gathers data from many sources as much as possible and is used for investigating individuals, groups, events and organisations.

In this unit, we shall discuss the types, functions, strengths, limitations and the process of case study method in detail.

11.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the importance of case study as a qualitative method of research;
- discuss different dimensions of case study as a research method;
- analyse the strengths and limitations of the case study method: and
- use case study method in your own research work.

11.2 CASE STUDY: A QUALITATIVE METHOD

Case study is one of the popular methods of research adopted by communication researchers. It is also a method of qualitative research. In social science research, there are three broad approaches, namely, positivism (objectivism), interpretive and critical. Each one has a paradigm that helps in the selection of appropriate research method. The classification of research is based on that intent and methods used for research.

11.2.1 Research Paradigms

Although some of these issues have been briefly touched upon in other units, it is worthwhile that we explore the research traditions and paradigms in social sciences and mass communication a little more. This is necessary because the case study can be seen as an approach to research, as a methodology or as a tool to be used. So, a context for case study as discussed in this unit is essential.

A few researchers like Blaikie and Neuman have identified three different approaches to research in social sciences. They are: *positivism*, *interpretative* and *critical* paradigms. Paradigms are based on statements that are accepted by all as valid. Paradigms help in the selection of an appropriate research method. Each approach has its own paradigm (theoretical framework or model of research). The positivist paradigm is the oldest and is extensively used in mass media research. Scholars like Augustus Comte and John Stuart Mill in the 19th Century have contributed enormously for popularising positivism, which is the bedrock of research in natural sciences.

Social scientists subsequently started using a modified version of positivism. This paradigm uses quantitative methods, hypotheses, and objective measurement. Sociologists Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey advocated the *interpretative research* tradition. Here the main purpose was to know and understand how people create meaning and interpret the issues and events in their every day natural environment. The interpretative approach has gained popularity since 1970s. The *critical approach* is widely used in the humanities. Critical research focuses mainly on concepts like freedom, justice, power in society and political ideologies, all of which have values associated with them.

The positivist approach differs from the interpretive school in three ways. First, both schools differ on the concept of reality. For a positivist, reality is objective and 'it is out there'. For interpretive scholars, no single reality exists. Each researcher can create reality as part of his/her research. In other words, reality is subjective. Positivists say that reality can be divided into various

components and by looking at each component; an understanding of the whole can be acquired. The interpretive scholar analyses the entire process, because for him/her, reality is complex, interlinked, and complete and cannot be divided. Second, the positivist considers all human beings are similar and prefers general categories to summarise their behaviours. The interpretive researcher believes each human being is different and cannot be fitted into general categories. Finally, the positivists would like to produce general laws of behaviour while interpretive researchers would like to generate a unique explanation regarding a particular situation or individual.

Based on the approach adopted, there have been different types of research in mass communication. The classification of such research is based on the intent and methods used for research. According to the intention, we can classify research as pure, applied, exploratory, descriptive, and evaluative and action. It can also be qualitative or quantitative. If quantitative research focuses on numbers and their meaning when analysed, qualitative research has an emphasis on the elements of subjective interpretation. Many of these approaches have been discussed in Block 1; we only recapitulate them here.

However, it is difficult to define the term ‘qualitative research’ because there are multiple definitions available. People consider that by defining the term, they will be restricting the boundary of research. The term ‘qualitative research’ can be used to mean:

- 1) A broad approach to research
- 2) A methodology of research, and
- 3) A specific group of research techniques.

Today, most researchers combine both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate a given phenomenon. Researchers use data collected from qualitative and quantitative data to gather a complete or holistic assessment of the phenomenon under study. This process of using both methods is known as ‘**triangulation**’. Qualitative researchers use small samples. The issue of generalisability is solved by increasing the sample size. Qualitative researchers use flexible questioning modes while in quantitative research questions are static or standardised questions are employed. All respondents are required to answer the same set of questions. When both methods are used, we cross check, or verify one set of data against the other, resulting in triangulation. A more rounded and complete picture of a problem or phenomenon is thus arrived at. With reference to the focus of this unit, i.e. the case study, this means that we use data from quantitative sources, combine it with data collected through case studies, to arrive at a broader picture of the issue being studied.

11.2.2 Main Features of Case Study Method

Case study is a common qualitative research method which is used extensively in anthropology, psychology, management, medicine and history. Historically, the case studies have roots in the beginning of modern social and cultural research between 1920s and 1950s. The case study method was linked to the Chicago School, especially in the works of Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld. It was on the same lines as that of Frankfurt School. The case study approach has a problem of defining a case. A case can be single person or social aggregates or cultural phenomena such as media organisations, media products, media events,

interpretative communities or socio-cultural processes. The contemporary trend is to focus on case studies.

Case studies are considered ideal when a scholar wants to understand a phenomenon in depth. In psychology, Sigmund Freud has been credited with the writing of case studies of his patients, while Margaret Mead was known for her use of case studies in anthropological research. However, for all practical purposes, the case study researcher collects data from many sources as much as possible to understand individuals, groups, events and organisations.

The case study method has also been described as an empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are sometimes not clearly evident (Yin, 1994). Take for instance, an experiment - it separates a phenomenon from the real-life context. In a laboratory, the environment is controlled, while in the field, multiple factors are at play. If you take the survey method, we attempt to define the phenomenon under investigation and we may limit the number of variables for research. In contrast, the case study method will have both single and multiple cases. One example of use of multiple case study method can be seen in political science in which comparative case study research techniques are frequently used. Mass media research also widely uses the case study method.

Sometimes, the case study is used to explore a situation, a location, a problem, or a context before a larger quantitative survey is undertaken. When used like this, the case study is part of exploratory research.

Wimmer and Dominick (2003) quote Merriam who has identified four main features of case study investigation.

- 1) **“Particularistic:** The case study focuses its attention on a particular situation, programme, phenomenon or an event. By doing so, it becomes a relevant method to study real-life issues.
- 2) **Descriptive:** The final outcome of this research will be an elaborate description of the topic being investigated.
- 3) **Heuristic:** A case study enables people to understand what is being inquired with new perspectives, new insights, new meanings and new interpretations.
- 4) **Inductive:** Case study method mostly depends upon inductive reasoning. Generalisations come out from the data evaluation. Case studies attempt to find out new relationships instead of verifying the hypotheses already in existence.”

To summarise, the main features of case study method are:

- 1) It can combine different methods and analytical approaches.
- 2) Defining a case study within a context of an approach is necessary, because the term remains vague and imprecise otherwise.
- 3) Construction of case study limits or borders is a serious and difficult issue.

11.2.3 Functions of Case Study

The main functions of case study method are:

- It permits collection of enormous amount of data.
- It allows the description of the uniqueness or peculiarities of a case.
- It offers an opportunity for intensive evaluation of the case.
- It analyses the causal and complex factors involved in the process.
- It attempts to study varied factors associated with the topic selected for investigation.

The case study method is widely used in administrative, diagnostic and therapeutic situations. It prompts the generation of new concepts or helps in testing the one in existence. It may also lead to the testing of well-formulated hypotheses.

11.2.4 Types of Case Studies

There are three types of case studies: **Intrinsic, Instrumental and collective.**

- 1) **Intrinsic:** This is undertaken for better understanding of the particular case. The purpose is not theory building. It always begins with an identified case.
- 2) **Instrumental:** It analyses a particular case to order to provide an insight into a more general issue or to validate or revise a generalisation.
- 3) **Collective:** This focuses on different cases to inquire into a general phenomenon. In a way it is an instrumental study stretched to several cases.

Both instrumental and collective case studies have cases that are selected by the researcher. Case studies can be descriptive and/or theoretically oriented.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answer.

2) Compare your answer with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Explain the concept of positivism.

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- 2) Define case study method.

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3) What are the main functions of case study method?

Case Study Method

11.3 CASE STUDY METHOD:STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Case Study is a very versatile method of research, enabling in depth study of a phenomenon. However, it can also be highly subjective. In this section, we shall look at some of the strengths and limitations of case studies.

Strengths

The case study research generates enormous amounts of data in relation to the research topic. It produces huge details of the subject. When researchers are not sure of what they want, then this is the best method. If a researcher is seeking clues or ideas for further research, case studies are highly beneficial. The method is not limited to exploratory research only, its boundaries can extend to descriptive and explanatory research as well. It can be used to supplement quantitative data collection when a sub-sample is chosen for further analysis. The case study method also helps to understand the 'why' of a phenomenon, i.e. by showing us causal relationships between what can be different variables and explaining the nature of the relationship. The best way to find out reasons for certain results in quantitative studies is through case studies. Combining such findings with the existing understanding of processes, one can help to build or strengthen existing theories.

Limitations

The case study method has its own limitations. Experts have pointed out mainly three. The first criticism is that in most cases the method does not have the scientific rigour, especially if used by an amateur. It seems easy to do because a rigorous case study demands more time and effort. The second one is that the case studies do not provide scope for generalisations. Researchers will have to opt for some other method if they want to make normative statements based on statistics to substantiate the occurrence of a phenomenon in a particular population. But it is not to assert that the findings of all case studies are unique. If theoretical generalisations are the research purpose, then the case study method suits well. Lastly, case studies consume a lot of time and may produce massive amounts of data and in such a situation, understanding, analysing, and summarising the data may become a difficult task.

It is a fact that case studies allow an investigation of interplay of factors responsible for development over a specific period of time. As listed by reputed scholars, the case study method is flexible in the sense that it accepts all methods of data collection. It also studies any aspect of the topic taken for research or all aspects and can be done in any social setting. The case study method is best suited for groups or process analyses, more than individuals. It provides a broad range of insights into human life, one can also test certain specific theories. However, it cannot be used for investigation of macro issues. There is also a

possibility of researcher's bias due to perceptual mistakes, over - confidence, and conclusions based on wrong judgement or analysis of findings.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answer.

2) Compare your answer with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Examine two strengths of the case study method.

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2) Mention two limitations of the case study method.

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3) Can a researcher's judgement influence the findings of a case study?

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11.4 THE PROCESS OF CASE STUDY

Unlike other methods of research, the case study method does not have a well-written or documented procedure of research. For instance, both survey and experimental method have a well laid out processes. Nonetheless, we can identify five stages of the case study research, these are design, pilot study, data collection, data analysis, and report writing.

11.4.1 Design Stage

We begin the case study design with questions that have the elements of how and why. A clear question can clarify the rest of the efforts in a case study. Then is the question of what to analyse or what is the case? Mostly, it is an individual or an event. If it is individuals, information must be collected about each individual and then the results could be reported in the single or multiple case study format or matrix. Sometimes, the boundaries of how, why, and what we are going to study are not clear. We then have to define them, either as a particular person or persons, a decision, or a specific organisation, or a programme or an event.

As discussed in Unit 5, the review of literature is a first stage and a helpful practice, since much of findings may have been already reported in terms of previous investigations, research, and theories. Using the review of literature will also help in defining the boundaries of the study.

The second stage is the pilot study. The pilot study is part and parcel of case study research, and precursor to the main study. Before embarking upon a pilot study, the researcher must prepare what is called the **case study manual**. This is a well-constructed document, an operational manual that details the procedures to be employed for the case study. An active and well-defined study manual includes the procedures needed to reach an identified person or organisation and the procedures to access relevant records. The manual outlines the ethical steps to be followed when approaching cases, especially if they are individuals. It lists and describes the data collection instruments in detail. The manual should also include the schedule of data collection and guidelines to solve the issues of logistics. The study manual should contain important questions of the study, and a list of possible sources of information. The manual must clearly mention the questions for interviewing prominent personalities.

The researcher should start the pilot study only after the study manual is prepared. As discussed earlier, a pilot study is conducted as a first step to test the research design as well as field procedures and to revise them, if needed. Some unexpected variables may surface during the course of pilot study. There may be issues with the study protocol or with logistics. The manual also permits researchers to employ different data gathering methods and observe many different activities from different perspectives. By analysing the results of the pilot study, we can get an idea of what the case study will probably look like, where the snags are and then revise and finalise the study manual.

11.4.3 Data Collection

The third stage is data collection. After a case is chosen, there are many ways to collect data about the case. We can identify several major sources of data for case studies. As discussed in Unit 6, these may include both primary and secondary sources. Documents are a rich source of data. These may be letters, memos, minutes, agendas, brochures, pamphlets, posters, historical records and many others. Survey research tools, such as questionnaire, intensive interviewing are also used for data gathering. Ethnographic methods of observation are another technique of data collection. A physical artifact like a tool or a piece of furniture can also be a source of evidence. For instance, the old news-gathering tools such as the tele-printer and the typewriter, when replaced by computer and Internet based news sources tell a story about the impact of technology in the mass media. So, we can use multiple sources of data providing scope for triangulation, and improved reliability and validity of findings. That is why multiple source data will always be preferred to single source evidence. That is also why case studies are used in conjunction with other sources and methods of data collection.

11.4.4 Data Analysis

The fourth stage is data analysis. Quantitative techniques offer specific procedures for data analysis. When it comes to case studies, no specific data analysis formula is available, as each case study can be different. However, three broad analytic strategies are recommended: they are: pattern matching, explanation building, and time series.

Let us take the first one, **pattern matching**. In this strategy, an empirically based pattern is selected and compared with one or more predicted patterns. Imagine a newspaper has a new management tool in the regular meetings between top management and reporters, excluding the editors. As per organisational theory, a researcher can predict consequences of the new practices such as stress between editors and reporters, higher productivity and changed supervisory roles. If the data analysis confirms the occurrence of these management changes, conclusions can be drawn. In case the predicted pattern does not coincide with the actual one, the earlier study inferences may have to be revisited.

In the second analytic strategy, **explanation building**, the researcher attempts to build explanation about the identified case by making statements about the cause or causes of the phenomenon being inquired. The strategy can be in several forms. Normally, a researcher prepares a theoretical statement about a process or result and compares the statement. If need be, s/he revises the statement, examines another comparable case and repeats the process any number of times. For instance, the issue of technological failure in media can be taken for explanation. A researcher may presume that lack of management expertise was responsible for it but may find that lack of management expertise is only partially responsible for the failure. Lack of market research may have been another factor for the failure. With this revised version of explanation, the researcher can move to another medium to check whether the explanation holds or needs further revision, until s/he reaches the level of getting a satisfactory answer.

The next strategy is **time-series analysis**. Here the researcher attempts to compose a series of data points (time intervals) to some theoretic trend that was predicted before the research, or to some alternative trend (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003). To take an example, if several cities in the country experienced newspaper workers strikes across several years, a case study researcher may produce predictions as to the information seeking behaviours of the people in these cities during the times of strikes. S/he may conduct a case study research to find out whether such predictions can be validated.

11.4.5 Report Writing

The case study report does not have any single fixed format for writing - in other words, the report writing can take many forms. It can be a conventional report format, starting with problem, methods, findings and discussion or it can opt for a different non-conventional format. Some reports look best when written in the chronological fashion, a few others may opt for a comparative analysis. Sometimes, it may be best to provide a broad report of findings, with small text boxes or sidebars of descriptions of individual case. When dealing with human beings for case study data collection, it is prudent to change the name to protect the source. However, the case study report should be written keeping in view the audience for whom it is written. The style of writing for decision-makers is obviously different from that of writing for a reputed scholarly journal.

Check your Progress 3

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answer.

2) Compare your answer with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Identify the five stages of case study process.

- 2) What is a case study manual?

- 3) Does the case study method have a particular report writing style?

11.5 LET US SUM UP

Case study is one of the popular qualitative research methods adopted by communication researchers. There is sometimes a misconception that it is an easy way of carrying out research. What must be clearly understood is that it is not a simple way of conducting research. The case study method needs rigour, objectivity, and clarity of objectives. The case study method is part of all scientific research, in both natural and social sciences.

In social science research, there are three broad approaches, namely, positivism (objectivism), interpretive and critical. Each one has a paradigm that helps in the selection of appropriate research method. The classification of research is based on that intent and methods used for research. Today most researchers combine both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate a given phenomenon. Qualitative research is flexible, as such, the case study method is also flexible. The issue of subjectivity is the major drawback of qualitative research.

The case study method gathers data from many sources as much as possible. It is used for investigating individuals, groups, events and organisations. Case studies are ideal when a researcher wants to understand and describe a phenomenon. Some of the areas that make a large use of case studies are anthropology, psychology, management, medicine and history. There are four main features of case study investigation. They are: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. Unlike other methods of research, the case study method does not have a well – documented procedure. However, we can identify the five stages of case study research such as design, pilot study, data collection, data analysis and report writing. There is no specific data analysis formula for case studies. Yet three broad analytic strategies are recommended: These are: pattern matching, explanation building and time series.

The main functions of case studies are:

- 1) They permit collection of enormous amount of data.
- 2) They allow the description of the uniqueness or peculiarities of a case.
- 3) They offer an opportunity for intensive evaluation of the case.
- 4) They analyse the causal and complex factors involved in the process.

The three types of case studies are intrinsic, instrumental and collective. The four aspects of case studies within the framework of qualitative studies are: the history of case studies, the problem of case definition, the way that case studies are done, and the question of generalisation and theorisation. The case studies are commonly used in public relations campaign or project evaluation.

The case study report does not have any single format fixed for writing. It is flexible and can take many forms. Irrespective of the way it is written, it should keep the audience in view. One-shot case study is a type of case study research. It is based on observing a single group at specific point of time. The case study method has its own advantages and disadvantages. It generates huge amounts of data and it is useful when researchers are not sure of what they want. Case study can extend to descriptive and explanatory research as well. Critics argue that this method lacks scientific rigour, is time consuming and the findings cannot be generalised easily. However, with care and proper training, the method can be use deffectively in research for generating new insights.

11.6 FURTHER READINGS

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- 6) Wimmer, Roger D and Joseph R. Dominick (2003), Mass Media Research: An Introduction, Belmont (USA), Wadsworth Thomson Learning

11.7 KEY TERMS

Heuristic: Enabling people to understand what is being inquired into. To provide new perspectives, insights and meanings.

Inductive: Finding out new relationships among different phenomena, instead of verifying the hypotheses already in existence.

One-shot case study: Based on observing a single group at particular point of time.

Pattern matching: An empirically based pattern is selected and compared with one or more predicted patterns.

Positivist paradigm: This model uses quantification methods, hypotheses and objective measurement in research. For a positivist, reality is objective and s/he considers that all human beings are rational and similar.

11.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Positivism is the oldest school of inquiry. It was popularised by Augustus Comte and Stuart Mill. Positivism uses quantification methods, the bedrock of natural sciences. For positivists, reality is objective and can be divided into various components. They consider all human beings as rational and would like to produce general laws of behaviour.
- 2) Case study is a common qualitative research method. It is an empirical inquiry that collects data from multiple sources to examine a contemporary phenomenon in its real life context. Case studies can go beyond exploration to be descriptive and explanatory as well.
- 4) The case study method:
 - Permits huge amounts of data.
 - Allows the description of uniqueness.
 - Offers an opportunity for intensive evaluation.
 - Analyses the causal and complex factors involved in the process.
 - Attempts to study varied factors associated with topic selected for investigation.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Case studies can yield enormous amounts of data. They can explain why things have happened and provide an understanding of issues, events, or institutions.
- 2) Case studies lack scientific rigour, do not provide scope for generalisations, and are time consuming.
- 3) If the researcher is inexperienced, does not follow procedures, or does not analyse the data correctly; his/her judgment can influence the findings of a case study.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Five stages of case study process are:

Design stage: It should answer questions of why and how. Then it must move to answer what to analyse and fit the results into a fixed matrix.

Pilot study: Case studies are based on well-defined study protocol for a larger investigation. The study protocol can be revised as a follow up of pilot study.

Data collection: This is done by using multiple sources like documents, interviews, surveys, observations and others.

Data analysis: No specific formula is available but normally analytic strategy, pattern matching and time-series analysis are used.

Report writing: Both conventional and non-conventional methods or styles can be used.

- 2) The study manual is a document which contains detailed instruction on how the case study is to be carried out.
- 3) There is no particular format for writing up a case study and it can take different formats.

