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empirical social and economic research

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Potential and availability of market research data for empirical social and economic research

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Abstract:

The potential of market research data for secondary analyses lays mainly in the fields of consumer behaviour, consumption patterns and media usage. Their availability for empirical social and economic research depends on the professional rules as well as on the readiness of the market research agencies and their clients to make them available.

Many market research projects are focused on specific target groups. This focuses their potential for secondary analyses on representative insights regarding these groups as well as on basic and methodological research. In most cases it is necessary that public availability of market research data is agreed contractually with the client of the research project.

For a number of market research projects access to the official statistical data is important for methodological reasons. Therefore private research agencies should have the same privileged access to them as academic research institutions. As long as this access has not been established it is unlikely that their readiness to make market research data publicly available will increase.

1. Introduction

Although market research projects are commissioned and conducted in order to solve individual clients' problems they can be of interest for empirical social and economic research, too. In fact, many market research data contain reasonable potential for secondary analyses for purposes of empirical social and economic research.

The availability of market research data for empirical social and economic research depends not only on the applicable legal provisions and professional rules but also on the readiness of the market research agencies and their clients to make these data available for secondary analyses. Therefore it is crucial to create a win-win-situation for market research providers and clients as well as for empirical social and economic research.

2. The market of market research in Germany

Since in developed countries research-based information is of increasing importance for decision-making in economy and society the German market research industry is growing continuously. The current situation is characterized by the following empirical information (detailed figures are available at www.adm-ev.de):

- In 2007 the total turnover of the market and social research agencies in Germany was about 2.1 billion €
- Only less than half of the turnover has been achieved in Germany which demonstrates that market research has become a global business.
- More than 90 percent of the turnover came from quantitative research projects which have a higher potential for secondary analyses than qualitative projects.
- About two third of the turnover was achieved by so-called ad hoc studies specially designed and conducted to solve a single problem.
- The most important clients of the market research agencies are the consumer goods industry, the pharmaceutical industry and the media industry. Compared to these the public-sector clients play a minor role.
- More than 40 percent of all quantitative interviews have been conducted by telephone.

Corresponding to these figures the specific potential of market research data for secondary analyses for purposes of empirical social and economic research lays mainly in the broad field

of consumer behaviour, consumption patterns (including goods and services as well as usage of time) and media usage.

3. Potential of market research data for empirical social and economic research

The potential of market research data for secondary analyses for purposes of empirical social and economic research depends on some key factors:

3.1 Information and knowledge about market research

Despite of the close co-operation of the associations representing market and social research (see clause 5. below) many social and economic researchers have relatively limited information and knowledge about the market of market research and its current and future developments. This problem limits the potential of market research data for secondary analyses. Therefore the situation looks like a treasure hunt: “Study the map carefully, dig deeply and you will find the treasure!” In the reverse case this gap of information and knowledge also applies to many market researchers regarding the potential of empirical social and economic research of academic and non-profit research institutions.

3.2 Representativeness of market research data

As a consequence of individualization of lifestyles and consumption patterns an increasing number of market research projects are focused on specifically defined and sometimes relatively small target group(s). Accordingly the sample designs of these research projects do not aim to be representative for the whole population in Germany. However, in principle this development does not reduce the potential of market research data for secondary analyses for purposes of empirical social and economic research significantly. The research data of market research projects on specific target groups still allow for structural insights on a large number of social and economic issues regarding these groups as well as for basic and methodological research.

3.3 Space of time between data collection and public availability

In many cases market research clients need the research results at short notice for fast and even accelerating decision-making. As a consequence the “half-life” of market research data for the private-sector clients is decreasing i.e. market research results become outdated in a shorter period of time. In principle, this development increases the potential of market

research data for purposes of social and economic research. Faster outdated of market research results reduces the period from the collection of research data to their availability for secondary analyses provided that market research agencies and clients are actually prepared to make them available publicly.

3.4 *Infrastructure and documentation*

The academic survey research in Germany has a well established infrastructure for secondary analyses of survey data. But for the “outside” world – including parts of the market research industry – this is hardly known. Since the public availability of market research data for secondary analyses is not only the responsibility of the market research agencies and their clients the “*GESIS – Zentralarchiv*” as the institution in charge should increase its recognition and visibility outside the academic scientific community. For example, the exhibition stand of the “*GESIS*” at the annual market research trade fair which has been introduced in 2008 is an important step to achieve more recognition and visibility in the market research industry.

In order to assess the possibilities and limitations of the research results of a single project as well as their comparability with the research results of other projects detailed information about the methodological aspects of the project shall be available. According to DIN ISO 20252:2006 “Market, opinion and social research – Vocabulary and service requirements” the technical description of a quantitative research project shall comprise the following details:

- the name of the client;
- the name of the research service provider;
- the objectives of the research project;
- the target group for the research project;
- the achieved sample size against projected sample size and reasons, if relevant, for not obtaining the projected sample;
- the date of fieldwork;
- the sampling method, including the procedure for selecting respondents;
- the data collection method;
- the response rate (in the case of probability samples) and the definition and method of calculating it;
- the type of incentives, if applicable;
- the number of interviewers, if applicable;
- the interviewer validation methods, if applicable;

- the questionnaires, any visual exhibits or show cards, and other relevant data collection documents;
- the documents, materials or products used as part of the research project, if applicable;
- the weighting procedures; if applicable;
- the estimating and imputation procedures, if applicable;
- the reliability of the results, including (when probability samples are used) estimates of sampling variance and estimates of non-sampling errors or indicators thereof;
- the results that are based on subgroups and the number of cases used in subgroup analysis.

It is the responsibility of market, opinion and social research service providers and their clients as well to establish and promote these standards for documentation of research projects and research results.

4. Availability of market research data for empirical social and economic research

Besides the factors described above the potential of market research data for empirical social and economic research is affected by the availability of these data for secondary analyses. The actual availability of market research data depends on the professional rules of market research and applicable legal provisions as well as on the readiness of market research agencies and their private and public clients to make the data available. This readiness mainly depends on the benefits which are connected to public availability of privately commissioned market research data.

In order to exhaust the potential of market research data it is necessary to create a win-win-situation for the market research agencies and their clients as data providers on the one hand and the empirical social and economic research as data users on the other.

4.1 Professional rules and legal provisions

The already mentioned international quality standard for market, opinion and social research DIN ISO 20252:2006 does not contain specific requirements regarding public availability of research data. With regard to the publication of research results the following is laid down: “Research service providers may publish research results for scientific or other purposes if they have conducted the research project at their own expense, or if such publication has been contractually agreed with the client commissioning the research project, or if the latter has consented to such publication.” (see DIN ISO 20252:2006, clause 4.8.4). If this international

quality standard would have dealt with public availability of research data, too, probably the corresponding requirements would have been defined equally to those regarding publication of research results.

Also the “ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Market and Social Research” (last revised December 2007) does not contain specific professional rules regarding public availability of market research data. With regard to the publication of research results it points out the responsibility of researchers and clients as well. Both shall “ensure that published results are not misleading”. (see Article 11b)

However, it belongs to the professional responsibilities of market research agencies to safeguard the confidentiality of their clients and of all documents and materials which have been provided to or produced by them in the context of research projects. This requirement applies to the research data, too. In the international quality standard for market, opinion and social research DIN ISO 20252:2006 the following is laid down: “Every effort shall be made to store records in a manner adequate to ensure ... that their confidential nature is not compromised. Unless otherwise agreed, all research records shall only be available to the client ...” (see DIN ISO 20252:2006, clauses 4.9.3 and 4.9.4)

Since in the market research industry almost all research projects are commissioned by private or public clients it is crucial for the availability of the market research data that this is contractually agreed with the clients. Without such an agreement the market research agencies in most cases are not allowed to make research data available for secondary analyses as part of their professional responsibility towards their clients.

According to the professional principles and rules of market, opinion and social research in order to safeguard respondents’ privacy the research data must be processed and transmitted to clients and any other third parties in an anonymized form only. Such research data are no longer personal data. Therefore analyzing them does not allow for re-identification of single respondents and the data protection laws do not apply. However, when making research data available for secondary analyses market research agencies shall undertake specific efforts to check and to avoid any potential problems with regard to re-identification of single respondents, especially since secondary analyses might be conducted by foreign researchers abroad.

It shall be considered from a legal point of view whether the intention to make research data publicly available for secondary analyses shall form part of the necessary consent of the data subjects, i.e. the respondents from whom the research data are collected. According to the “*Bundesdatenschutzgesetz (BDSG)*” the data subjects shall be informed of the purpose of

collection, processing and use of their data. The important question is: Does this legal provision mean that respondents also shall be informed of and must agree in subsequent secondary analyses when asking them to participate in a certain market research project?

4.2 Readiness of the market research agencies

Without doubt making market research data available for secondary analyses for purposes of social and economic research contributes to the increase of awareness and perhaps reputation of market research agencies provided they are quoted in publications in accordance to the professional rules of the scientific community. But is this possible increase of awareness and reputation alone actually seen as a (relevant) benefit from their point of view?

For a number of market research projects the data of the official statistics are not relevant. But for other projects access to the individual – of course anonymized – data collected by the statistical bureaus is important for methodological reasons, e.g. to calculate benchmarks or weighting factors. In these cases the private market research agencies should have the same privileged access to the official statistical data as academic research institutions. As long as this access has not been established it is unlikely that the readiness to make market research data publicly available for secondary analyses will increase. In principle, this readiness exists – at market research agencies and their clients as well – as it is evident by various examples and illustrated by the following one:

In 2005 during a conference on data fusion and data integration which has been organized jointly by the “Statistisches Bundesamt”, the “ADM Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V.” and the “ASI Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Institute e.V.” a presentation was given by Heiner Meulemann and others on the potential of media consumption data for secondary analyses. These data are collected since 1954 in order to provide for a reliable empirical basis for commercial purposes of media planning. They have been archived at the “ZA Zentralinstitut für Empirische Sozialforschung der Universität zu Köln” from the very beginning. Therefore these data also form a valuable source for secondary analyses especially in the fields of media usage, social structure and social change as well as research methodology.

4.3 Readiness of the market research clients

The readiness of private-sector market research clients to make research data from projects they have commissioned available for secondary analyses for purposes of empirical social and economic research depends mainly on their value for decision making. As long as market

research results contribute to the clients' business success this readiness does not exist at all. Only if the research data no longer give an advantage in business competition the readiness of clients to make research data available to the scientific community may arise. From then the readiness of market research clients to make privately purchased research data publicly available mainly depends on a convincing argumentation that this is of mutual benefit for both sides.

4.4 *Establishing the win-win-situation*

For the market research industry regular access to the official statistical data is the key factor to increase the readiness of the research agencies as well as their clients to make market research data available for secondary analyses for purposes of empirical social and economic research. In order to create really a win-win-situation a regular access might be attached to certain conditions, e.g. to a commitment to make the research data of single projects publicly available for subsequent secondary analyses if individual statistical data have been used in order to conduct the research project.

It is obvious that regular access to the official statistical data of private market research agencies would require a revision of the “*Bundesstatistikgesetz (BStatG)*” since this law regulates in its article 16 (6) that access to the individual data is restricted to institutions which carry out independent scientific research. Since the “*Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*” does not differentiate between basic and applied research but protects the freedom to conduct both types of research in the same manner, the restriction of the access to individual statistical data for “independent scientific research” only seems not appropriate.

Of course, it is primarily the responsibility of the “*ADM Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V.*” which is the association representing the interests of the private market research agencies in Germany, to negotiate with the relevant political bodies in order to revise in the long term the *BStatG* accordingly. However, political representation of interests in this field probably will not be successful without a strategic alliance with the associations and institutions representing the empirical social and economic research.

5. **The role of the associations**

In Germany the close co-operation of the professional and trade associations which represent market, opinion and social research has a long tradition and is more intensive than in many

other countries. This co-operation is focused mainly on self-regulation in a broad sense by defining professional rules and developing quality standards including a joint disciplinary body as well as organizing joint conferences regularly. In the latter the Federal Statistical Bureau is involved, too. The comparatively few contacts between the associations representing the private and academic market, opinion and social research on the one hand and the respective bodies representing the empirical economic research on the other should be intensified in the future.

With regard to the potential and the availability of market research data for empirical social and economic research the existing close contacts between the associations and institutions representing private and academic empirical survey research can provide especially the following advantages:

- They contribute crucially to increase the mutual understanding of market research and empirical social and economic research which is a condition for exhausting the potential of market research data for secondary analyses.
- They help to maintain the research data infrastructure of the empirical survey research and to improve its mutual benefits for research data suppliers and users as well.
- They are a condition for organizing joint conferences, meetings and workshops as an important mean regarding the two bullet points above.
- They help to intensify the relations between suppliers and users of research data which is crucial for their public availability for secondary analyses.
- They are a condition to establish the strategic alliance in political representation of interests in order to create the win-win-situation described above.

6. Summary

The potential of market research data for empirical social and economic research lays mainly in the broad field of consumer behaviour, consumption patterns and media usage. The actual availability of market research data for secondary analyses is affected by professional rules and legal provisions as well as the corresponding readiness of market research agencies and their clients. Regular access to the official statistical data for private market research agencies like academic research institutions is the key factor to increase the readiness of the market research industry to make research data publicly available. The co-operation of the professional and trade associations which represent market, opinion and social research in

Germany plays a major role regarding the possibilities for secondary analyses of market research data.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1. The mutual information and knowledge about market research and empirical social and economic research should be further improved by various means (e.g. joint conferences, workshops, newsletters etc.).
- 7.2. The data infrastructure of empirical survey research should be promoted more actively outside the academic scientific community to increase its visibility for market research agencies and their clients.
- 7.3. The promotion of the already existing standards for documentation of the methodological and technical details of research projects by the market research industry as well as the empirical social and economic research should be intensified.
- 7.4. The availability of market research data for secondary analyses for purposes of empirical social and economic research should be agreed contractually when a research project is commissioned.
- 7.5. In order to improve the readiness of private market research agencies and their clients to make market research data publicly available for secondary analyses the bodies representing the academic social and economic research should actively support the efforts regarding regular access to statistical data for private market research agencies.
- 7.6. The bodies representing the empirical economic research should be included into the already existing close co-operation between the associations representing market, opinion and social research in Germany.

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