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## Using marketing research in quality of life theory and practice

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### Abstract

Quality of life can be defined both from an objective approach (using macroeconomic indicators) and from a subjective one (referring to the individual's level of satisfaction), therefore the methods of research needed in both cases are very diversified. The paper starts with the presentation of the marketing research methods from the theoretical point of view, emphasizing their special features for the quality of life (QoL) research. The second part of the paper focuses on the practical perspective of QoL analysis, classifying the studies in three categories: marketing researches totally dedicated to QoL study, marketing researches that address a much wider socio-economic topic (QoL included), and QoL studies that combine the results of marketing studies with macroeconomic statistical data.

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*Keywords:* Quality of Life, Marketing Research, Survey, Observation, Focus group, In-depth Interview

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### 1. Introduction in Quality of Life Studies

Considering the present global concerns for sustainable development within the domestic and foreign policies, the study of the quality of life concept comes as a basic requirement in order to better understand the particular context of the market and then implement a coherent strategy of QoL improvement.

Quality of Life can be defined as the subjective perception of an individual on the objective conditions of life and well-being. This definition highlights the two approaches in QoL theory: objective and subjective. Trying to combine the two approaches, R. Costanza (2008) defines quality of life as “the extent to which objective human needs are fulfilled in relation to personal or group perceptions of subjective well-being”. While objective needs refer to subsistence, reproduction, security, affection, etc., subjective perception aims at happiness, life satisfaction and personal usefulness.

Whether we study quality of life as a whole or we focus on one of its dimension/approaches, the practice showed us that there is an acute need for a systematic research process, thus the need for marketing research, with all its methods, techniques and instruments, which gives a higher level of accuracy and relevance to the data collected.

### 2. Theoretic Point of View for the Marketing Research Methods Used in Quality of Life Studies

In quality of life studies we used both qualitative and quantitative methods of marketing research, but the predominance is for the second category, due to the need for quantifiable information, that will later be compared

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with the results of other studies in order to identify the level of development for this phenomenon in time. The most frequent quantitative methods used in quality of life studies are survey and observation, while the qualitative researches most used are focus-group and in-depth interview.

Both from the theoretical and practical perspective, the most frequent used marketing research method is the survey, which involves collecting data about individuals through interviews. This method allows a wide variety of data collection from a large number of persons, so that the data gathered are representative, accurate and relevant.

To meet the three conditions mentioned above, the most important step within the survey is the construction of the questionnaire, the instrument for data collection. It is said that a research cannot be better than its questionnaire (Moser, 1967), theory and practice proving this statement true by the multitude of problems that a researcher may face as long as he is not developing a coherent process of the questionnaire design, problem such as lack of representativeness of the collected data, different answers due to the different interpretation for the same question, lack of exhaustiveness in the answers provided in the questionnaire, etc.

The most important studies about the subjective approach for quality of life are based on surveys, of which are worth mentioning the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), Mercer Quality of Living Survey, Perception Survey on Quality of Life in European Cities (conducted at the request of the European Commission), Eurobarometer, European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), European Social Survey (ESS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), World Value Survey (WVS), The Stiglitz Report and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality-of-Life Index.

However, researchers that use the survey are usually facing two major problems: the lack of interest to participate in the research and the uncertainty regarding the truthfulness of the data provided by respondents.

These two disadvantages of the survey may be eliminated by means of observation, where the information collected reflects the actual behavior of individuals, precisely because, most of the times, they are not aware they are being observed, so they cannot manipulate the information provided to the researcher. Because of the concealment of the research based on observation, there have been a series of problems that appeared with regards to the ethical issues of carrying out such research. The solution is that these studies are confidential; the participants are not in any way connected to the information collected.

In terms of quality of life studies, observation is founded mainly in medical studies regarding the state of health and welfare of patients, without disturbing them with further questions. Observation can be either mechanical (using various medical instruments recording the patient's vital signs), or personal (by observations made by the persons around the patient).

Focus-group research involves relatively long and detailed discussions with a group of 8-12 people about a phenomenon, without having a structured interview. Instead, the researcher is proposing topics for discussion on which the participants would state their point of view, guiding them carefully towards the needed information.

Although most of the marketing research for quality of life is based on surveys, there are still a series of studies whose data are collected using qualitative research, particularly through focus-groups. But such studies are usually aimed at a much narrow area of quality of life and are addressing a certain category of the public (such as patients or former patients, the elderly, people with disability, etc.) or relate to a particular theme (the influence of a certain disease on the quality of life, the evolution of quality of life after illness recovery, the meaning of the quality of life for the individual, etc.). An example in this respect is the article "The use of focus groups in evaluating quality of life components among elderly Chinese people" (Leung et al., 2004), which assesses the quality of life among the elderly population in China, through group discussions with 44 people. As it can be seen above, usually focus-group researches have a much lower incidence rate compared with surveys, thus their result cannot be extrapolated globally.

The in-depth interview involves discussing with a sole participant and is recommended when the group discussion cannot be organized, either because of the scope of the research (in the case of research with experts, taking into consideration data confidentiality; or for researches on intimate or taboo topics), or because the type of participants is requesting such a research method (taking into account that not everyone expresses freely their opinion in front of strangers). The focus group features are found also in the in-depth interview, thus the data collected using this method cannot be extrapolated for the entire community, but may offer a detailed picture of the

phenomenon investigated (Voinea and Filip, 2011). Such an example is the research conducted by the Department of Primary Care and Population Sciences, in Great Britain (Zahava and Bowling, 2004), that is focused on the quality of life among the elderly.

Although there are already a large number of studies on quality of life, marketing research find its applicability when the subjective approach is concerned, especially because it is based on the interaction with the individual, as he is questioned on his level of satisfaction on living standards. The objective QoL approach, focusing largely on macro-economic indexes, is not assessed through marketing research, but rather through statistical analysis based on indicators that usually characterize a certain geographical area, not every individual in particular. This is, in fact, the main difference between the two QoL approaches: the objective approach takes into account the development of macro-indexes characterizing the society, while the subjective approach is based on the opinion of each individual on how he perceives the quality of life and his satisfaction in relation to this.

The numerous studies in the thematic area of quality of life lead to the emergence of a series of important scientific journals dedicated to these studies, such as *Quality of Life Research* (monthly publication under the well-known Springer Publishing House), *Applied Research in Quality of Life* (the official journal of the International Society for the Study of Quality of Life), *Quality of Life* (magazine published by the Quality of Life Research Institute from Romania).

### 3. Categories of Marketing Research Applied in the Quality of Life Studies

Marketing research on the quality of life can be divided into three categories, depending on the coverage of the subject and the methods used, thus we have: marketing research fully committed to study the quality of life; marketing research that addresses a much broader socio-economic topic, while the quality of life is only a section of the study; studies on quality of life that combine the results of marketing research with macro-economic statistical records. Each of these three categories will be discussed in this sections, presenting its particularities and examples of the most representative studies.

#### 3.1. *Marketing research fully dedicated to the quality of life*

As mentioned above, surveys are the most used methods in the thematic area of quality of life, some of them having acquired international legitimacy, by having a very good coverage of the phenomenon: European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), Mercer Quality of Living Survey, and Perception Survey on Quality of Life in European Cities.

**The European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS)** is organized every four years by Eurofound, the first being in 2003, when 28 countries were covered (25 EU and 3 EU candidate countries), with a total of 26,000 respondents. The study focused on a series of aspects of quality of life, such as employment, income, education, household, family, health, work and life balance, satisfaction with the living conditions and the perceived quality of society. The findings were published in a detailed research report - First European Quality of Life Survey, which was afterwards customized for each country evaluated. The second phase took place in 2007, when information was added for Norway, Turkey, Macedonia, and Croatia. The results were published in the Second European Quality of Life Survey.

Comparing the results of the two phases of the study, one can notice that the EU integration had a positive impact on the quality of life in the new Member States. The largest increase in satisfaction was recorded for indicators that describe the private part of life (such as household and living standards), but also indicators that correspond to public services such as education, health and public transportation. With regards to the bivariate analysis, we can notice that the largest differences in quality of life were recorded by the population with high and minimum income, so we can conclude that the income influences the level of satisfaction with life, more than other demographic indicators such as gender or age.

**The Mercer Quality of Living Survey** is conducted annually, comparing 221 cities based on 39 criteria. New York is the base for comparison (with the coefficient of 100) and other cities are compared to it. The most important criteria of evaluation are safety, education, hygiene, health, culture, environment, recreation, political-economic

stability and public transportation. This indicator is used each year by the multinational companies that decide to open offices or factories in different cities, enabling them to establish the salary that can be offered to the employees from each area. According to the 2010 study, European cities dominate the top, the first three being Vienna, Zurich, and Geneva.

**The Perception Survey on Quality of Life in European Cities** was organized in November 2009, having two other previous editions in 2004 and 2006, and measures perceptions of individuals in 75 European cities (the EU countries, Croatia and Turkey) regarding the quality of their life. The study was implemented at the request of the European Commission, which desired to have a base of comparison between the perception of the population and the “real” data from various statistical sources, on issues such as security, unemployment, air quality, etc.

Not only the European countries are concerned with the quality of life, as such surveys are organized in other parts of the world also. An example would be **Quality of Life Survey in New Zealand**, which is a partnership between eight projects that are assessing the quality of life in New Zealand. The survey is conducted every two years since 2004 and covers issues such as health and welfare, crime and safety, community, culture and social networks, environmental protection, public transport and lifestyle, work and study.

In Romania such QoL surveys are also realized, the most well-known of which is organized by **The Quality of Life Research Institute**. The study was conducted during 1990-1999 period, and also in 2003, 2006 and 2010, on a sample between 1000 and 1500 respondents.

### 3.2. Marketing researches that address a much broader socio-economic topic, quality of life being only a section of the study

As mentioned above, there are researches that go beyond the thematic area of quality of life, approaching much wider socio-economic issues – Eurobarometer, European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), European Social Survey (ESS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and World Value Survey (WVS).

**The Eurobarometer** is a survey with increased relevance for the social field, especially for the coverage on the topics of relationships and social interactions, attitudes (especially towards EU integration and EU institutions), but also because it contains subjective assessments of quality of life issues (health, family and social life, personal safety, financial situation, employment situation).

**The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC)** is a longitudinal study that allows the collection of comparable data on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions. It was initially launched in 2003 for Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria and Norway, and evolved to comprise all the EU member states in 2007.

**The European Social Survey (ESS)** is a social survey with academic foundation conducted to elaborate and explain the interactions between the changing European institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of various population groups.

**The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)** is an annual program of transnational cooperation for the development of surveys that are referring to important social aspects such as the government’s role, national identity, social relationships and support systems, labor market orientation, etc.

**The World Value Survey (WVS)** is a study conducted in 97 nations to assess the changes in values and their impact on the social and political life. The survey is conducted every five years, making it possible to perform an analysis for the evolution of the phenomenon in the last 30 years.

### 3.3. Studies on quality of life that combine the results of marketing research with macro-economic statistical records

Another category of studies on quality of life that deserves to be mentioned are those based on the statistical records and results of surveys, which ultimately leads to shaping a more accurate picture of the quality of life (bringing together the two approaches: objective and subjective). The most relevant study in this category was made

by the Franco-German Ministerial Council, which applied to a large extent what the *Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission* outlined in 2009, at the request of French president Nicholas Sarkozy. The main limitation of this study is the fact that it has only been applied for France and Germany so far, but the complexity of the indexes used and the relevance of the data collected lead to an international appreciation of the study (Franco-German Ministerial Council, 2010).

Another study from this category is *The Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality-of-Life Index*, whose methodology correlates the results of surveys on subjective satisfaction on living conditions with objective determinants of quality of life, at the level of 111 countries. The indicators considered in this index are: material wellbeing, health, political stability and safety, family life, community life, climate and geographical conditions, job security, political freedom, and gender equality. We can notice, in this index also, the European supremacy, the top five countries being: Ireland, Switzerland, Norway, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

In the last 3 years, an important theme of analysis for the quality of life refers to the influence of the financial and economic crisis. Thus, a series of surveys have been designed and conducted to assess the level of satisfaction of the population regarding the quality of life in crisis conditions and to identify how the economic crisis has affected the welfare of individuals and society. An example is the survey conducted in 2009 by the University of Turin, Italy (Rollero and Tartaglia, 2009). The results emphasized the important role played by the psychological variables, family and the optimistic economic expectations on the perceived level of satisfaction with the quality of life.

#### 4. Conclusions, limitations and future research

Quality of life represents a current concern for the international policy in regards to sustainable development, most countries having a national strategy in this direction. But, before designing the strategy, there is the necessity to know the present context, which brings the need for marketing research.

The marketing research theory has already a fulfilling background, with methods and instruments that can be used in any market and on any subject. Therefore, the next step is to identify the proper methods and instruments that can be used in the QoL studies, taking into consideration both approaches for this concept (objective and subjective) and adapting them to the special aspects of quality of life.

As it was shown in this article, the practice has exceeded the theory by developing three categories of marketing research that are used in the QoL studies, therefore showing their applicability and highlighting their particularities.

A limit for this paper can be represented by the fact that it tries to cover the entire quality of life thematic area, and therefore presents only the marketing research that analyze the concept as a whole, omitting the particularities of the marketing research in each QoL dimension.

Considering the complexity of the marketing research field, corroborated with the variety of quality of life aspects, future scientific paper can specialize in the study of each QoL dimension (education, health, entertainment, social inclusion, labor market, politics and governance, personal security, welfare), therefore identifying and then deepening the analysis of the theoretic methods of marketing research within the practical studies for quality of life.

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