

FAQ 41: How shall I compare my findings with research by others?

What's the issue?

Comparative communication research is a method for achieving cross-border and expanded insights. You can draw conclusions from reaching audiences across cultures and systems. In addition, the similarities and differences between research objects within the context of the systems and cultures they are situated in help interpret the results (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004). Replication is a key element when it comes to generalization.

As technology has made communication across the globe easier and media systems have gone global, the awareness of similarities and common experiences has increased, and the claim that certain research findings are more applicable in other populations than those sampled for a particular research project.

Common practice

Research findings are always interpreted in the context of some prior knowledge or assumptions which are sometimes based on research and/or theoretical frames. A single study is never so influential that it eliminates all argument. Therefore replication is crucial. After all, if the result of a study is contrary to prior beliefs, there will most likely be strong holders of those prior beliefs who will defend their position. To facilitate comparison between studies, many researchers strive for comparability.

Comparability covers both methods and research design. This applies, for example, to sampling and measurement. Spatial and temporal comparisons are key concepts.

Questions to think about

When you consider carrying out a study which is to be comparable to previous research results, it is essential that you (a) thoroughly review previous knowledge and research at the national level, enabling you to integrate the hypotheses of older research in their own wording, so as to facilitate long-term reliable results and that you (b) also analyse international research results, so as to be able to compare and contrast your hypotheses to those in other countries, which makes a comparison at the system and country level possible, and (c) that you make sure your methodological approach in designing the research instruments and in interpreting the results is compatible with previous studies.

Pitfalls to avoid

The research world is much too full of isolated studies, yielding significant results with idiosyncratic samples under particular circumstances.

When interpreting study results and drawing conclusions for practical implementation, it is imperative to take national conditions into consideration. In practice, this means that identical results can lead to different conclusions for different countries. Even if the hypotheses completely match, the conclusions may vary. Be exact in your translations, as terminology always carries a cultural mindset.

Example of a comparative research project

An example of a successful research project is doubtlessly the EU Kids Online project. As befits a cooperative project, the questionnaire was a joint effort which led to internationally comparable results. It proved impossible, however, due to the large number of countries involved, to accommodate all country-specific questions in the poll, despite the fact that this would have yielded a more comprehensive national comparison.

References and further resources

Esser, F. & Pfetsch, B. (2004). *Comparing political communication: Theories, cases, and challenges*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hasebrink, U. (2012) Comparing media use and reception. In F. Esser & T. Hanitzsch (eds) *Handbook of comparative communication research*. New York. Routledge.