Step 1. Structuring a Research Project (or Thesis) Idea
Developed by **Prof. Dr. Francisco Tigre Moura**

Are you a marketing Bachelor, or possibly a Masters, student trying to develop an idea for your thesis? Do you already have an idea for the research project but you do not know exactly how to structure it?

Well, please do not tell me you are sitting on your couch squeezing your brain hoping that some interesting and meaningful idea will come out. That is certainly **NOT** how it works!

But don't worry. After some years supervising (MANY!) students, I've summarized here some hacks that hopefully will be useful for you!

Reminder: These are MY personal suggestions (some scholars may have different views). So make sure to discuss your marketing research ideas with your supervisor!

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1. First Step: **STRUCTURE** YOUR INITIAL IDEA

The very first aspect you must have clear is to understand the difference between **CONTEXT** and **THEORY.**

This is extremely important!

After understanding the difference between them, you will define them for your study. So here we go, one element at a time:

a) CONTEXT

1. Are you interested in conducting a study about **Cars**? **Artificial Intelligence? Smartphones**? **Music Concerts**? **Kids**? **Organic food**? **Elderly Consumers**? **Fashion**? **Germans**? **Australians**?
   - o   Well, these are all **CONTEXTS** in which a study can be applied!

2. **CONTEXTS** are the scopes which a study can be applied to. It can (or should) be narrowed to, for example:

   - o   *Product/service category: e.g. Beer, headphones, hotels, laptops, Coffee.*
   - o   *Sample (Consumer group): e.g. High income, Seniors, Loyal customers, Innovators.*
   - o   *Markets: e.g. Brazil, Australia, Germany, USA.*

3. **The more specific you define your context, the clearer your study will be**! So, for example, you can define your context based on all three scopes: **sample**, **market** and **product/service category**.

   o **Example 1**: You can conduct a study involving **Adults** (Sample), **China** (Market) and **Luxury cars** (Product category).
   o **Example 2**: You can conduct a study involving **Bachelor Students** (Sample), **New Zealand** (Context of market) and **Hostels** (Service category).

4. Also, you **CAN** choose **more than one** context of sample, market or product! Usually when this is done, the study involves comparing the different markets, samples or products. And these tend to be much more interesting studies!

   o **Example 1:** A study comparing three **consumer groups (Low income, medium income and high income)** in relation to **energy use (Service Category)** in **Germany (Market).**

5. And how should you choose the context(s) of your study? **VERY SIMPLE**!

   o **Passion:** What are you truly passionate about? No, I mean **REALLY PASSIONATE!** Is it Music? Cars? Video-games? Fashion? Food? Traveling?
     ▪ If you know what your passion is, then it is exactly what you should write about! Remember, your thesis will require a lot of effort. Do you really want to discuss and spend time reading about something you are not fond of? Of course not.
     ▪ So if you do not know what your **TRUE PASSION** is, take some time thinking about it.

   o **Relevance of the Study**: How timely is the context that you chose?
     ▪ For example, now (November 2016) there are many relevant topics that are of interest to many people: Global Warming, Virtual Reality, Artificial Intelligence, Healthier eating habits.
     ▪ There are also topics that will always be relevant: Sustainability, Music, Health, Employability.
     ▪ So make sure to choose contexts that are relevant for society and that can provide interesting insights!
     ▪ An interesting way to find relevant timely topics is to simply visit credible sites and read what the main discussion topics are. The list of possible sites is endless, but here are five great examples:
       ▪ Harvard Business Review
       ▪ The Economist
       ▪ The New York Times
       ▪ Recode
       ▪ Inc.

   o **But what if my passion is outdated?** Ok, I understand. You are passionate about old typewriters... Well, I'll leave you to discuss it with your supervisor. But there is always a way to link to a current topic or adjust to find a middle ground.

   All good with Context? Great! So let's move on!

b) THEORY

Ok, so let's assume you chose as **CONTEXT** for your study to investigate **Adults** (Sample), **China** (Market) and **Luxury cars** (Product).

The following step refers to addressing the question: **WHAT would you like to understand about adult Chinese consumers and luxury cars (investigate, study, research)?**

Answering this question will allow you to define which theoretical concepts must be defined. For example:

- Would you like to understand their perception of **quality of cars**?
- Do you wish to understand their **willingness to buy luxury cars**?
- Perhaps how they **evaluate** car options during their **decision making process**?
- Maybe how they try to reduce the **perception** of **risk** while searching for information?
- Do you wish to investigate their **post-purchase evaluations**?
- Or maybe how **branding and situational factors** influence their **decision making process**?

All of the concepts highlighted are EXAMPLES of **theoretical concepts**! And they are **CRUCIAL** for you to define your study.

KEY QUESTION: But how do you choose your theoretical concepts? How do you know which concepts apply to your context?

HACK: READ previous scientific studies related to the context of your study. By doing so you will familiarize yourself with what has been researched and identify research gaps.

- **And how do you find such studies?** Also simple.
  - Google Scholar: Google Scholar is perhaps the easiest way to start. You simply use keywords related to your context to start with. Go through (this means reading!) the studies and see which concepts have been already applied.
  - **Digital library of your university:** Most universities have their internal system of digital catalogues.
  - **Search for research gaps:** Most scientific studies provide (in their last section) ideas of future research directions. You may choose to develop a study suggested previously by those authors (and make sure to contact them and inform! They will appreciate it!).

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2. Second Step: DEFINE THE "**AIM**" of YOUR RESEARCH

The aim represents a general statement that describes your study. It will be included in the introduction chapter of your thesis and is really important because it should inform the reader what your study will be about.

How to write it?

1. The statement should ideally be **ONE** (**TWO maximum!**) sentences long.

2. It should be **short**, **objective** and **clear,** enabling readers of ANY audience to understand what your study will be about.

- Your aim should ideally include your research **context** (s)
    - o **Sample:** Which consumer group (s) will you address?
    - o **Market:** Which market (s) will you address?
    - o **Product/service**: Which product (s) will you address?
- Your aim should also include (or provide clear indication of) the main **theoretical concepts** applied to your study.
    - o **Example of theoretical concepts**: Quality, trust, decision making process, willingness to purchase, risk, innovation, satisfaction, loyalty, etc.

Here are some examples:

- **Example 1:** This thesis aims to investigate the influence of virtual reality *(context of product)* on the decision making process *(theoretical construct)* and willingness to book *(theoretical construct)* of senior travelers' *(context of sample and service)* in Germany *(context of market)*.

- **Example 2:** This thesis aims to investigate and contrast the impact of toy *(context of product)* advertisement on television *(context of medium)* on American *(context of market)* children's and parents' *(context of sample)* trust, willingness to purchase and quality perception *(theoretical concepts)*.

- **Example 3:** This thesis aims to compare Brazilian and Chinese millennials' and baby boomers' *(context of sample)* usability and risk perception *(theoretical context)* towards different mobile technology devices *(context of product*).

> ### 3. **Third Step:** DEFINE THE "**OBJECTIVES**" of YOUR RESEARCH

The objectives represent the **main steps in order to fulfill your research aim**. So basically, the objectives are the overall procedures of your study.

This is the logic: Your research AIM should be fully fulfilled once all research OBJECTIVES are addressed.

Got it?

Some further recommendations:

- There is **NO** specific number of objectives that your thesis should have. It depends on each project.

- However, usually the **FIRST** objective refers to the review of scientific literature of the main theoretical concepts of your thesis.
    - o **Example 1 (from section 1 above)**

- **Example 1:** The first objective involves the review of the relevant scientific literature regarding the concepts of decision-making process and willingness to book in the tourism context.
- **Example 2:** The first objective of this thesis involves reviewing the relevant scientific literature regarding trust, willingness to purchase and quality perception.
- **Example 3:** The first objective of this thesis involves reviewing the relevant scientific literature regarding usability and risk perception.

- Usually, the following second, third, fourth (or more) objectives will involve the **DATA COLLECTION** process of your thesis.

- Thus, your following objectives should describe:
  - The **design** and **method** of each objective. For example, will the objective have a descriptive, exploratory or causal design? And which method?

    - **Example of a Descriptive objective:** A structured survey will be conducted with senior travelers to identify their online booking behaviors.
    - **Example of an Exploratory objective:** A focus group will be conducted with senior travelers to discuss their online booking behavior and identify the main elements which may reduce usability and enhance risk during their online booking process.
    - **Example of a Causal objective:** An experiment will be conducted to investigate the influence of different mobile technology devices of senior travelers' usability and risk perception during their online booking process.

- **EACH** step of data collection should be described as a **SEPARATE objective.**

- Usually the **FINAL** objective should involve **managerial recommendations** you have developed based on the findings of your study.
  - It should focus on what companies and managers should do based on the implications of your findings.
  - **Here is an example of a final objective:**
    - **Example:** Lastly, this thesis will provide clear and applicable managerial recommendations for travel agents, tourism professionals and academics on how to better assist senior travelers during their online booking process.

HACK: Essentially your first research objective will involve **LITERATURE REVIEW**, the following ones will involve **DATA COLLECTION** and the final one will involve **MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDTIONS**.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

So was this article helpful for you? Hope so!

Here is a brief summary:

1. **Choose a CONTEXT for your study that is both relevant for the industry but also part of your passion.**
2. **Define the theoretical topics for your study based on scientific literature and on relevant previous studies.**
3. **Be very clear when describing the aim of your study. Make sure it includes both context and theory.**
4. **Make sure that you developed your objectives in a way that by completing all of them your aim will be fully addressed.**
5. **Don't forget to discuss everything with your supervisor**.
    o Here are recommendations for the meeting:

        • Bring a coffee for your supervisor. Coffee makes ideas much better. If I'm your supervisor, bring cappuccino with brown sugar. Never tea.
        • If your supervisor makes any jokes, laugh as if you liked them. Jokes from academics are hardly ever good, but being silent will make it awkward.