A COMPARISON OF THREE PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A BUSINESS RESEARCH CLASS

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Abstract: *Although projective techniques are becoming more popular in the business field, the techniques are mainly adopted to explore consumer purchasing behavior and the consumer's perception towards brand. It is interesting to note that a limited number of studies in the management field have been conducted in order to compare different results from the application of different projective techniques. Therefore, this research has been conducted using three different projective techniques: word association, sentence completion, and cartoon test aimed at exploring how to apply each technique effectively when a respondent has no experience with this projective research method. Sixty- six respondents participated in this research. They were Thai students, registered for a business research class in a Master of Management degree course. Some of them had experience in conducting research at bachelor level but were inexperienced with projective techniques. Each respondent was required to apply three projective techniques to examine their perception of a Japanese product. After the students had completed the assignment, focus groups were conducted.*

In terms of applying the techniques effectively, the research results revealed that the respondents had different perceptions on different techniques. Comparing the three techniques, respondents expressed that the order least difficult to most difficult technique was; word association, sentence completion, and cartoon test. This is because the word association technique in this study is slightly adapted from a general format. The adaption is similar to the one used during a popular television program where people are asked to share three words, expressing an idea. By familiarity with the three word expressions, respondents could generate an idea of a Japanese product quickly and easily. The characteristic of sentence completion helped stimulate ideas for inexperienced respondents. On the application of a cartoon test with inexperienced respondents, a step by step clarification of how to fill up a balloon dialogue was considered as a crucial initial step in order to obtain the expected research results. Moreover, clear explanations help prevent misunderstandings and allow researchers to obtain more useable resulting material. Furthermore, introduction of the famous Japanese cartoon, "Doraemon", which was known to all respondents, produced a positive stimulus for expressing their perception of a Japanese product.

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Thus with inexperienced respondents, different techniques provide different results. Therefore, the decision to select an appropriate technique should be made according to the purpose of the research. Finally, adaption of the three techniques to render them more familiar to inexperienced respondents is suggested in order to obtain greater participation and therefore expose more insightful, truer and accurate feelings.

1. INTRODUCTION

An incremental interest in adopting qualitative research in the business management field has been noted during the last twenty five years. However, projective techniques have not been employed as much as much other qualitative research tools (Özlem, 2009) although projective techniques have long been recorded as successful tools in psychology since its origination in 1895 (Sayre, 2001). Thereafter, it was increasing adopted in social science and later on in business studies. This may be because in conducting research, we begin with the objectives of what we want to know. For most business research questions, we generally gather reliable and valid data from surveys in order to generalize business phenomena. Quantitative research then takes a principal role that best suits to explain the cause and effect of business scenarios (Sayre, 2001). Conversely, in exploring causal relationships through quantitative research, there is a need to understand the relationship between the consumer and product/service. Gathering information from consumers; somehow, may not disclose directly their preferences and feelings. Therefore, projective techniques were adopted.

From literature reviews, projective technique paradigms are to indirectly elicit a response from stimuli that can be in the structured or unstructured form in order to discover the inner thoughts of respondents (Donoghue, 2000). Projective techniques are applied for examining attitude (Stienman, 2008; Will, Eadie, and MacAskill, 1996), motive (Özlem, 2009), behavior (Özlem, 2009), perception (Ramsey et. al. 2004), feeling/emotion (Stienman, 2008; Will, Eadie, and MacAskill, 1996; Ramsey et. al. 2004), thought (Stienman, 2008; Ramsey et. al. 2004), and experience (Stienman, 2008). The first projective techniques study published in the business field was Haire's shopping list in 1950 (Steinman, 2008). Later on, more complex business scenarios demanded understanding of the insight of consumer driven usage of projective techniques in the field.

Based on the generic principle of projective techniques, in business, they are considered appropriate to identify market opportunity, generate hypotheses and ideas, explore and develop new concepts of product/service (Roininen, Arvola, and Lähteenmäki, 2006), understand consumer perspective (Vidal, Ares,

and Giménez, 2013), discover consumer decision making, and auditing brand perception (Hofstede, et. al. 2007).

Although recently projective techniques are becoming more popular in the business field, the techniques are mainly adopted to explore consumer purchasing behavior and perceptions regarding brand. It is interesting to note that a limited number of studies in the management field have been conducted in order to compare different results from the application of different projective techniques.

Therefore, this research has been conducted using three different projective techniques: word association, sentence completion, and a cartoon test aimed at (1) exploring how to apply each technique effectively when a respondent has no experience with this projective research method; (2) studying what are the concerns when adopting each technique and (3) analyzing what are different results when apply different techniques

2. PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES IN THE BUSINESS FIELD

Business scholars pointed out an appropriation of using projective techniques in the field of management by giving reasons that with its principles of projective techniques allowed researchers to overcome barriers of both the researcher conducting the research and the respondents involved in the study. For the research side, a projective was appropriated for the non skilled researcher (Sayre, 2001). Furthermore, it helps eliminate communication barriers such as language. For respondents, it helps eliminate fear of being judged as negative manager (Stienman, 2008).

Unlike in others fields of study where types of projective techniques are classified according to process e.g. Zubin, Evron and Schumer, 1965, Dole, et. al. (1986), etc. classified projective techniques into 2 types: Normal (in which sub-classification was of two types: classic, and generalized) and abnormal. In the business field, projective techniques are recommended for application according to task, response type and research purpose. However, there is inconsistency in terms of classification among scholars. In total, there are four types:

1. Association: This type is the most adopted projective technique in business studies (Donoghue, 2000). Response is automatic to stimuli which can be word or image. The association is appropriated for extracting information about product and brand (Will, Eadie, and MacAskill, 1996; Burns and Lennon, 1993). Furthermore, particular research in branding development for what is called "Personification," and is based on a generic concept of association aimed at exploring brand personality and characteristic.

2. Completion: For completion, respondents are asked to complete an incomplete sentence or story (Donoghue, 2000). Stienman (2008) indicated that completion is frequently applied in business research as it benefits in giving rich information within a short time span. Completion helps express relationships with brand/product by, descriptive user of the product, (Sayre, 2001)

3. Construction: Bubble drawing and third person questioning are the most common use of construction (Stienman, 2008). Construction is regarded as suitable in the exploration of respondent attitude and preference toward brand and retailer (Sayre, 2001) as well as respondent behavior (Donoghue, 2000).

4. Expressive: Expressive allows the respondent to express feelings toward product/service/brand through role play, draw, or painting.

Practically, projective techniques are unique ways of asking customers about themselves and the products they use. Combining various projective technique results helps the researcher understand more about consumer reality (Sayre, 2001).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

This research has been conducted using three different projective techniques: word association, sentence completion, and cartoon test; corresponding to three different techniques: association, completion, and construction.

Sixty- six respondents participated in this research. They were Thai students, registered for a business research class in a Master of Management degree course. The course was delivered in the third term of their five term length course.

Among those, there were 18 males and 48 females. They were from various bachelor degree backgrounds, from pure science to art (art, language, education, business, engineer, law, pharmaceutical, science, etc.). Their range of age is from 24-38. The average age is 28. Some had experience in conducting research at bachelor degree level but were inexperienced with projective techniques. Each respondent was required to apply three projective techniques to examine their perceptions of a Japanese product. The theory of projective ideology was introduced to them prior to testing of an application of the three techniques.

For the association type, word association was selected with a slight adaption for local context. Generally, the word association technique is implemented by either (1) asking respondents to choose a list of words which first come to mind or (2) presenting stimuli then asking for the first thought that comes to mind. In this study, neither of the two implementations mentioned in literature reviews was conducted. This study decided to adapt a technique; however, it was still

based on the grounded ideology of completion type: first thought coming to mind. Currently, in Thailand, there is a TV program named VRZO that is popular among teenagers. The program emcee will ask interviewees to explain their opinion about any topic, using only three words.

For the completion type, a sentence completion technique was selected instead of story completion technique because that story completion is mainly claimed to help examine the emotions of respondents towards brand as the main propose, but the test in this study was to allow the student respondents to experience how to answer and how to decide on a word completion test rather than to explore students' feelings toward any particular Japanese brand.

Furthermore, the sentence completion test was designed with the intention of replication of the question, aimed to examine whether novice student respondents would notice the replication or not and whether the replication question should be used to ensure the validity of the answer.

For the construction type, a cartoon test was selected. Generally, when applying this technique in business, an ambiguous consumer-related scenario (e.g. customer stands in front of the shelf, customer queues up at cashier counter) is suggested. The main purpose of this study is to allow the student respondents to experience different techniques and find out what helps them understand more as a novice researcher, but not to examine their perception towards a Japanese brand. Creation of cartoon selection is brought in.

Thai students are very familiar with Japanese Manga (Japanese cartoon). Therefore, the test was created from the Japanese cartoon "Doraemon". Doraemon is a story about the daily life of an elementary school boy named "Nobita" and his robot cat "Doraemon". The reasons for the Doraemon selection are that this cartoon is very famous. Almost all Thai students have been familiar with this cartoon since their formative years, both in the TV program and comic book form. Furthermore, this cartoon is not gender specific as both boys and girls like it. The test was comprised of twelve cartoon blocks and sixteen balloon dialogues. Instead of randomly picking a page of cartoons from a comic book and removing its original dialogue, the cartoon page was newly created by selecting blocks from various comic issues. This enabled the selection of cartoon scenes that expressed less emotion between the two main characters, and involved two character dialogue and individual thought between Nobita and Doraemon.

From the three projective technique categories, the student respondents were instructed to begin with the association technique as sequentially it seems less ambiguous than the other two techniques.

After the student respondents had completed all three techniques, focus groups were conducted, aimed at discussing their opinions on the application of each technique as well as the clarification of research results.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study shows a comparison between all three projective techniques. The first two: word association and sentence completion were favoured over cartoon completion. It is interesting to note that respondents with a science background tended to prefer sentence completion rather than word association, the reason given was that its structures helped stimulate ideas.

4.1 Word Association

For word association, in terms of method, research results showed that adapting word association to meet with the local context was very useful for novices. Respondents commented that if they needed to conduct qualitative research in the future, they would select a technique that allowed respondents to understand easily. Furthermore, they stated that from their experience of being a respondent, using things that they are familiar would eliminate their fear and confusion. Respondents shared the experience that it helped them feel more relaxed and therefore enjoyed this method much more.

When further detailed questions were asked about fear and confusion, the answer from the majority was that they were unfamiliar with qualitative techniques but more familiar with surveys. They felt more comfortable in answering with three words as they had often seen in the TV show. In addition, most respondents commented that when talking about research, they felt it was distant from the reality of the business world, and, in their thoughts, more theoretical and serious and may not be applicable in real business practice. However, with the technique, familiar from the TV show, they felt that this was something that could be easily used to conduct research in real business life.

In terms of research results obtained, this study found that a few student respondents answer only one word as they misunderstood three as three syllables for example "Quality" as it is pronounced "qual-li-ty". However, this study found that even though those students answered only with one word with three syllables, the word that they answered with was similar to those with three words.

Through word association, the study showed that the most selected words were relevant to the attributes of Japanese products for example: quality, durable, expensive. Second, the most frequently found was the product brand name such as Daiso, Glico, Sanrio, etc.

4.2 Sentence Completion

Although respondents expressed the view that this projective technique was one of the easiest to conduct, over half of sixty six respondents did not know that there was a duplicated question within the seventeen sentences. Those with awareness of a duplicated question provided the same answer to both questions, or either left it blank. Among those without awareness, most answered the same for both duplicated questions.

When the respondents had completed the incomplete sentences, I observed that the majority began with the first question and followed it through to the end. Very few students started and went through the questions to find those they could answer easily first. In terms of the research results obtained, there was no difference in results no matter which method respondents completed in the test.

It is interesting to find that in the first incomplete sentence: "Japanese product is…." . Instead of mentioning the first thought of Japanese product attribute: "Quality"; like that found in word association.Most respondents answered were "product that made/manufacturer in Japan". This reflected the country of origin. This seemed surprising as for a projective technique I would have expected that the first thought to mind would have been the same no matter what technique was applied.

When analyzing content, more details emerged. The results showed that respondents mainly described Japanese products rather than brand name. The outstanding attributes were high quality, innovation, high price, technology, identity, unique, and packaging. Many stated that Japanese product price should be reduced.

In terms of quality, the study found that few students compared Japanese product quality with European, Thai, Chinese, or Korean products. All believed in world class acceptable quality.

Another interesting point that this study uncovered is that although sixteen questions were asked differently one answer that almost all respondents indicated was the identity of Japanese products. The discussion on the issue of identity revealed that respondents view identity in a positive way, and appreciated its unique character. Several suggested that it would be an advantage if there were English instructions for the product.

During the focus group, the issue of the most famous and most preferred brands was raised. The results revealed that the most famous and most prefer is not always the same brand. The most famous brands found were Toyota, Sanrio, and Sony. Whilst the most preferred brands were Sanrio, Shiseido, and Sony. Furthermore, those who gave the answer Sanrio and Shiseido were female while

the Toyota brand was mentioned by both female and male. Likewise, Sony was mentioned by males. However, it should be taken into account that there were more female than male respondents in this study.

The brand that the majority considered the most famous and preferred was identified as Sanrio. Results from the focus group indicated that respondents had been familiar with Sanrio products since they were young. This was a surprise as Sanrio is mostly an accessory for the young, but working women still like it. Sanrio is an expensive brand which the majority stated they would like but sometimes their parents did not buy it for them due to the price. Presently, they are all working and so can afford to buy it for themselves.

Another point raised in a discussion was that there seems to be no new brand name mentioned. The majority of the mentioned brands were introduced some time ago. The newest brand found was Tokyo banana as this is the most popular souvenir from Japan. Although Tokyo banana was mentioned briefly in word association, it was found more in sentence completion.

4.3 Cartoon Test

From respondents' point of view the cartoon test is regarded as the most difficult technique of all for implementation as well as interpretation of results. However, results from the cartoon test produce such richness of information that the effort is considered well worthwhile. Results reflect not only brand name and attributes but also their attitude, perception and concern about Japanese products. The cartoon dialogue showed that there was male awareness of such female brands as Sanrio, Kitty, and Shiseido unlike in the other two techniques, which failed to detect this. Furthermore, numerous brands and categories were found. Details of brand were also expressed such as quality, brand history, innovation, packaging, etc. Although food categories remain the most mentioned products, new brands are mentioned Ramen Champion, Yamazaki Bakery, etc. Moreover, new product categories such as robotics, fashion apparel, and games are mentioned. When respondents mentioned quality, it was found that all who mentioned this point believed in the high quality of Japanese products. They somehow compared them with Korean, American, and European brands. However, there were brand products that were not Japanese, and those mentioned were SKII (P&G), and Kitkat green tea (Nestle). Respondent reasoning was that although both products were not Japanese they were thinking of green tea because they often think about Japan. For SKII, advertising shows that SKII uses Japanese scenarios and mentioned a Japanese herb compound, so they misunderstood it to be a Japanese brand.

Further, via the cartoon test, it was found that respondents mentioned behavior/characteristics of Japanese people, which again went undetected using the other two techniques.

The issue of adopting the Doraemon cartoon was discussed during the focus group, and all respondents commented that it helped stimulate ideas because of its relevance to Japan and their familiarity with the cartoon, from their very early years. Furthermore, discussion revealed that applying another cartoon such as using an American cartoon, respondents suggested that with the same story and reference to a "Japanese product", they would create a storyline with Japanese relevance, such as Batman having a Japanese girlfriend or Mickey Mouse and the gang going to Japan.

Using cartoons also somehow helps facilitate ideas and boosts the creative process. Content analysis showed that some "no" meaning words such as "Uhm…. Arrh…..Oh…Yah…" prompted the respondents to be creative in order to fill the speech balloon completely by the invention of expressive nonsense words.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In terms of applying the techniques effectively, the research results revealed that the respondents had different perceptions on different techniques. With inexperienced respondents, different techniques provide different results. Therefore, the decision to select an appropriate technique should be made according to the purpose of the research. Although literature reviews showed that the more ambiguous the best to draw insightful (Sayre, 2001) however this may not best suit for novice level. Begin with the more the structure of the technique, the better the clearer the answers. An adaption of the three techniques to render them more familiar to inexperienced respondents is suggested in order to obtain greater participation and therefore expose more insightful, truer and accurate feelings. However, adaption of techniques to local context has a few majors of concerns when implemented. Clear explanation is a requirement as they may misunderstand method and provide less information than it ought to be. At any given point, localization of projective technique like this study on word association may applicable and appropriate with a particular group of respondents. In addition, creativity in adopting techniques to local context and relevance to the study subject like a cartoon test are recommended. However, providing clear instruction prior applying each technique is suggested. This is one of the most key success factors particular with novice.

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