

Group Think or Effective Data Collection? Conducting Survey Research with Children.

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Abstract

Marketers are interested in the knowledge, opinions, attitudes and behaviours of today's young consumers. This paper explores the nature of child-oriented survey research by means of an unstructured observational study. A total of 376 children between the ages of seven and twelve participated in a study which examined consumer knowledge and behaviour. Participant's behaviour was observed during the questionnaire administration process with four primary issues being noted: group management, peer interaction, the ability to maintain interest and a desire to alter responses. It is suggested that researchers should limit the number of children completing a survey at one time, limit the number of items contained in the questionnaire and collect questionnaires soon after completion.

Key words: children, methodology, unstructured observation, survey administration

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Introduction

Marketers are interested in the knowledge, opinions, attitudes and behaviours of today's children. Ignoring W.C Fields golden words, "*Never work with children or animals*", researchers are choosing to explore consumer issues from a child's perspective.

It can not be denied that children play an important role in the consumer environment. Children represent not one, but three market opportunities. Children are consumers in their own right, they can have a high degree of influence over family purchases and more importantly, children represent the future market (McNeal, 1998). Many organisations spend a lot of time and money targeting child consumers with organisational spending on child-directed advertising and research being estimated at US\$20 billion per year (Arvanatikas, 2006). With organisations spending billions on child-directed research, the ability to collect accurate and useful information will play a critical role in the development of effective child-oriented marketing campaigns and the provision of appropriate policy protection.

While depth-interviews and focus groups are a widely used methodology in child-oriented research (e.g., Lawlor and Prothero, 2008, Harradine and Ross, 2007, Jamison, 2006, Vaccaro and Slanemyr, 1998), those taking a more quantitative approach to research tend to shy away from group administration procedures. One method that can be used to collect quantitative data regarding children's attitudes and behaviours is 'parent reports' (Valkenburg, 1999). Parents are seen as the most involved, and easily accessible informants for children. The question must be raised, however, as to whether parents can provide accurate information regarding all aspects of their child's behaviour, attitudes and opinions? Valkenburg and Buijzen (2005) utilized parent reports as a measure of children's susceptibility to peer influence. Parents were asked whether their child 'notices the brands that his or her friends appreciate' (p. 462). The ability for parental reports to yield highly accurate information is questionable given that parents may not be aware of their child's behaviour in some situations, such as the school environment, or with particular people, such as with teachers or peers (Briggs-Gowan and Carter, 1998). It is clear that when research touches on issues that parents may not be fully informed, researchers need to consider an alternative approach to data collection.

The potential flaws of parental reports suggest that information should be collected from the children themselves (Borgers and Hox, 2001). When measures of knowledge, opinions, attitudes and behaviours are sought directly from the child-respondent, researchers tend to undertake one-on-one, person-administered survey research (Götze, 2002). Ross and Harredine (2004) suggest that interviewing children individually reduces bias associated with peer interaction, including distraction and 'copy cat' answers. Although this technique has many advantages (researcher presence, familiar location) the very nature of this approach is very time consuming for both the researcher and the organisation from which children are being accessed (for example, school, day care etc).

With children playing an important role in the consumer environment, it is surprising to find that there are so few studies dedicated to improving child-oriented research protocols. This research aims to provide useful guidance for undertaking group-administered survey research with children. Consideration is given to both behaviours associated with questionnaire completion and the impact of group-size questionnaire administration.

Methodology

A two-phase research design was implemented whereby a quantitative questionnaire was devised to measure children's brand-related knowledge and behaviour. Government schools were selected as the source population for this research (as per Ross and Harredine, 2004, Moore and Lutz, 2002, Dotson and Hyatt, 2000).

An unstructured observational method was employed to examine group-administered survey methods. During questionnaire administration participant's verbal and non-verbal communication was observed directly by the researcher. Bale's (1950) 'interaction process analysis' was carried out whereby interactions were recorded as they took place (Sells and Ellis, 1951). The researcher maintained a field diary which contained details of group size, group composition, notes on specific events, overall reaction to the administration process and anecdotal statements made by participants. Results of this observational study are based on the researcher's reflection on their experience within the field, as well as notes taken during the questionnaire administration process.

Sample Selection

Cognitive development can have a major impact on children's learning and memory (Roedder, 1981). Cognitive development therefore, will have an impact on children's understanding, and ability to complete research materials. In an attempt to control for changes in children's cognitive development this study limited its focus to children in one cognitive development stage, 'concrete operations' (as proposed by Piaget, Ault, 1977). The concrete operations stage was selected as theorists have suggested that children six years of age and under have not yet acquired the skills required for tasks associated with information storage and retrieval, for example, recall tasks (Roedder, 1981). As this research focused on brand awareness, the ability to use information retrieval strategies was pivotal to the respondent's successful completion of research materials.

In Phase 1, children 8 – 11 years of age participated in the research. To provide further variation in the sample Phase 2 sought participants between 7 and 12 years of age, taking the sample to the age bounds of Piaget's 'concrete operations' stage.

After gaining permission from school principals, a total of 2133 information sheets and consent forms were sent home with students enrolled in years two through six at fifteen government schools located in a major city on the Australian eastern seaboard. Only those children who obtained parental consent, were present on the day of administration and did not object to the activity participated in the study.

Questionnaires designed for young children were developed. To improve understanding and reliability, the questionnaire contained simple language, reference periods, specified anchor points, limited response options and did not include don't know filters (as suggested by Borgers and Hox, 2001).

Method of Administration: Group Size

It was expected that group size would impact group dynamics and management. An important consideration, therefore, was the number of children within each administration group. When administering the questionnaire within schools the researcher had little control over the make-up and size of the administration groups. Group-size was impacted by parental consent, school schedules and facilities available. On completion of Phase 1 and Phase 2, the researcher had administered the questionnaire to a range of groups, differing in respect to both

size and demographic profiles. Phase 1 included fifteen groups, ranging from 3 to 12 children per group. Phase 2 included twelve groups with group sizes ranging from 5 to 16 children.

Sample Profile

In total, 376 children participated in the research. 192 children participated in Phase 1 (participation rate 23.7%) and 184 children participated in Phase 2 (participation rate 14%). The total sample for Phase 1 and Phase 2 comprised of children aged between 7 and 12 years with a mean age of 9.5 years. Of the total sample 45% were male and 51% were female.

Observations

Participant behaviour and group dynamics were observed and noted during questionnaire administration. Overall, participants were found to enjoy the exercise, displaying pride in their responses. Participants were also found to have good understanding of instructions, terms and requirements. During the observation period, four primary themes emerged these were: (1) group management, (2) prevalence of 'group think', (3) maintaining interest in activity and (4) desire to alter initial responses.

1. Managing Groups

For both Phase 1 and Phase 2 group management problems were experienced during the administration process. A number of disruptive behaviours were observed including raised voices and participants leaving their allocated seat. Group management issues were primarily experienced immediately after questionnaire distribution. It was evident that participants were very excited to participate in the activity. Participants were observed busily preparing their desks for the activity, clearing away unnecessary items, locating pens and sharpening pencils. With participants clearly eager to begin the activity, attention was quickly diverted to the task at hand.

Few group management issues persisted for the duration of the administration process. In a handful of situations, where group size exceeded 14 children, the ability to keep participants on the task at hand was relatively difficult. In these instances, participants were found to maintain loud discussions throughout the administration procedure; often this discussion was not associated with the task at hand. Teacher intervention was required when dealing with these larger groups.

2. Group Think

A key consideration is the potential for peer interaction and copy cat answers (Ross and Harredine, 2004). Throughout the administration process, few instances of peer interaction were observed. In fact, the opposite was observed. Participants appeared to protect their responses, angling their questionnaire away from other participants or covering completed responses with a pencil case or other item. These behaviours were most apparent whilst participants were completing the knowledge-based questions. It was evident that participants took pride in their responses, not wanting to give others an opportunity to 'take' their answers.

In a small number of instances participants *were* observed bouncing ideas off one another before formulating a response. Such 'group-think' behaviours were only observed when the questionnaire was administered to younger participants, those enrolled in Year 2 (7 – 8 years

of age), and the prevalence of these behaviours appeared to increase as group size increased. It is interesting to note that these behaviours were observed during both the knowledge and behavioural components of the questionnaire. For example, two participants were observed stating:

Participant 1 (8 years of age): “*How many hours did you put?*”

Participant 2 (7 years of age): “*I don’t know ... guess*”

It is suggested that these ‘group think’ behaviours may be linked to the participant’s cognitive development, with those participating in such behaviour being on the cusp of the ‘concrete operational’ stage. It was thought that these participants may not have yet obtained the memory retrieval strategies required to complete the task (as suggested by Roedder, 1981). No ‘group think’ issues emerged, however, when the administration group size was limited to eight participants, irrespective of participant age. It is therefore suggested that ‘group think’ may be linked to group dynamics rather than cognitive development. No measures of participants cognitive ability was undertaken to resolve this issue.

3. Maintaining Interest

The ability to maintain interest is imperative to the collection of accurate data. In an attempt to maintain participant’s interest, the questionnaire was developed to be simple and visually appealing. Despite this, a number of participants appeared to lose interest in the exercise. Behaviours observed included, finding alternative tasks to complete (for example, *repeatedly sharpening pencils*) and disrupting other students.

During Phase 1 of the research, loss of interest was most prevalent as participants were nearing the end of the questionnaire. Participants were found to lose interest whilst reporting their own behaviour. No participants were observed losing interest whilst completing the knowledge-based questions (which were placed at the beginning of the questionnaire). A number of participants complained directly to the researcher regarding the repetitive nature of the questionnaire. It is, therefore, suggested that this loss of interest was related to the length, and repetitive nature of questionnaire rather than participants experiencing difficulty with the task.

In an attempt to reduce participant fatigue the questionnaire administered during Phase 2 was shortened dramatically. While Phase 1 of the research employed repeated measures across six test brands, Phase 2 included repeated elements for only three test brands, reducing the number of items from 126 to 79. During Phase 2 no avoidance behaviours were observed and no lack of interest (boredom) was reported to the researcher. All participants appeared to maintain interest until questionnaire completion.

4. Altering Initial Responses

It was evident during the administration process that participants had a strong desire to be ‘correct’. As participants moved past the knowledge-based questions on to the behaviour-related questions they were provided with the names of the test brands selected for the research. As a result, participants were prompted as to the ‘correct answer’ for the knowledge-based questions. For example, “How often do you play *XBOX* with your friends?” Only participants in Years 4, 5 and 6 (9 – 12 years of age) voiced to the researcher that they had identified this link between questionnaire sections.

In an attempt to stop participants altering their initial responses, participants were asked to place each section of the questionnaire (designed as separate booklets) into an envelope after completion. The initial thought that participants would place the completed section in the

envelope (and leave it there) was quickly dashed. Participants were observed removing questionnaires from the envelope to check or change their initial responses to consumer knowledge questions.

During Phase 2 questionnaires containing consumer knowledge measures were collected immediately after completion. Participants once again had a strong desire to alter their responses, asking for the return of their questionnaires. The collection of completed questionnaires ensured that the participant's initial thoughts were retained.

Implications and Conclusion

Children play an important role in today's consumer environment. Child-oriented research provides valuable information for the development of marketing programs and policy protection. It is, therefore, understandable that many consumer researchers are interested in the knowledge, opinions, attitudes and behaviours of this cohort. It would not come as a surprise that the collection of such data is challenging, requiring vast thought and preparation.

The purpose of this paper is to provide researchers with guidance for undertaking survey research with children. For researchers wishing to collect quantitative data directly from children (as opposed to parent reports), group-administered methods provide a number of benefits over one-on-one administration methods. Primarily, one-on-one data collection methods result in greater disruption to children's daily routine and longer data collection time-frames. Group-administered research is time efficient for both the researcher, and organization from which the data is being collected (for example, school, day care). Group-administered research also maintains the primary advantages of one-on-one administration techniques for participants, including enabling the participant to remain in a familiar location and the availability of assistance when and if required. Ross and Harredine (2004), however, identified a potential flaw of group-administration methods, that is, the opportunity for peer interaction and copy cat answers. It was evident through this research that peer interaction does occur in group settings. Careful planning including the consideration of group size and participant age can minimise or remove such issues. It is clear from the experiences of this researcher; group-administered survey research is feasible with a child sample. Three initial guidelines are offered to researchers wishing to undertake such administration methods:

1. For participants less than 8 years of age, limited group size to 8 participants
2. For participants 7 – 12 years of age, limited questionnaire length to approximately 100 items
3. If initial responses required, collect soon after completion

This paper provides an exploratory investigation into child-oriented survey research methods. Group-administered survey methods were evaluated by a visible unstructured observational method, whereby results are based on the researcher's reflection on their field experience. This research can provide direction for future focal behaviour sampling in this area. It is suggested that future research should undertake a more structured approach to data collection. It is also suggested that future research should be conducted to examine the response quality of group, and one-on-one questionnaire administration methods. This will provide researchers with further insight into effective child-oriented research protocols.

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