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Encouraging Asia's future marketers to use observation for consumer behavior information

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ABSTRACT

The argument postulated in this paper is that assigning students to practice observations and then, to interpret meaning about consumers' behaviors are likely to inform the future marketers' understanding of real-world consumer activities. Learning takes place as students connect marketing theory to real-world situations. This paper reviews the content of three student projects about consumers and mobile phones which were completed for one consumer behavior course at a Hong Kong university. The findings suggest that observations do contribute to students' learning more than rote activities that typify survey data collection. However, the depth of learning achieved from observations may differ because curiosity intensity will inevitably vary across individuals and groups.

INTRODUCTION

Observation is a recognized method for collecting data in marketing-related studies. The technique has progressed from watching people and taking notes to include videography as a way to limit information loss (Belk and Kozinets, 2005). The retail setting is an example where the technique has been used successfully when sales activities and associated service quality considerations are the focus (McKechnie et al, 2007). Conducting observations enables researchers to watch people during their normal or routine behavior activities which can be very different from the actions displayed in an experiment or simulated setting.

Explanations about the strengths and weaknesses of observations for data collection can be found in any basic marketing research text. Such discussions are likely to include arguments for and against participant or non-participant observations and whether, or not, to maintain an element of mystery or secrecy. Unquestionably, such knowledge is important for marketers when they must make decisions about techniques and methodologies. However, observations as a learning tool have been rooted in the research domain. Using observations as a means to activate curiosity and to encourage creativity amongst future marketers, when assigned as classroom projects, is an important value-add that has been missing from the literature.

This paper considers the results of a group project which was partial fulfillment of course requirements for an undergraduate consumer behavior module at a Hong Kong university. Students were asked to undertake observations in a retail setting where they could watch the behavior of consumers who were shopping for a particular product or service. The task activity was based on the premise that 'One way to find out about a phenomenon is simply to look at it in a systematic and scientifically rigorous way' (Field and Hole, 2003, p 64) albeit that achieving scientific rigor, as generally accepted in the academic performance of observations, was not a

criteria. The research question was simply stated as ‘does a task that requires students to observe the behavior of consumers contribute to future marketers’ knowledge about the real-world?’ Three studies, which were submitted by students for grading, focused on mobile phones and are discussed herein.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early thoughts about what attracts students to the marketing field identified three influences: youthful experiences, academic stimulus and occupational demands (Bartels, 1951). About the same time, Horn (1951) was advocating that working in the company’s marketing research department should be included in young trainees’ executive training programmes. Research activities involving qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis were suggested as a way to enhance future executive’s abilities to think creatively and to problem-solve accordingly. Today, in the twenty-first century, ‘...a constantly changing business environment and the demands put on business practitioners in general and more particularly marketers, the significance of being adept and agile thinkers becomes apparent’ (Hill and McGinnis, 2007, p 53).

To keep pace with business, it has been important for educators to monitor real-world needs and to encourage learning that will take students from the classroom to the workplace. One suggestion has been to increase creativity in marketing classrooms because typically ‘... students approach marketing problems as if they are algorithmic, operating under the mistaken belief that some formula or recipe exists that will lead to marketing success’ (Titus, 2007, p 268). Thus, exposing students to real-world marketing activities as part of their learning process contributes to their preparedness to deal with the inevitable uncertainties and ambiguities they will face.

However, a caveat to any education argument is that students’ learning styles do differ. Additionally, factors such as access to the teacher, whether in a traditional classroom setting or online, and socio-demographic variables may influence students, positively or negatively, throughout their education. Yet, when describing marketing students, Morrison et al (2003) suggest that it is education’s connection to the real-world that is a key issue. Their *sensate*, *visual*, and *sequential* learning style means that they prefer linear, step-wise activities that enhance their understanding and promote the ability to find solutions. Thus, developing communication skills (Young and Murphy, 2003) and critical thinking capabilities (Klebba and Hamilton, 2007) through classroom and course activities have been suggested as important teaching tools and learning elements in marketing programmes.

Preference for different pedagogical approaches by Asian and Western learners has also been noted (Rodrigues, 2004). Yet, a study undertaken to identify preferred teaching/learning techniques had inconclusive results. The question whether students preferred teacher-led activities, such as lectures, textbook reading and videos, versus student-focused actions, such as group projects, individual assignments and classroom discussions, was not definitively answered.

Asian cultures are suggested to be more comfortable with rote learning (Zha et al, 2006) which may be an impediment to creativity as they fulfill course requirements and complete project assignments. However, creativity is viewed as a skill that may be learned and nurtured regardless of cultural, east versus west, background. Thus, encouraging creative exercises within the framework of gradable tasks facilitates a bridge between the theoretical and the real-world as ‘... marketing students do seem to understand that creativity is applicable to the domain of marketing, and when combined with discipline-based knowledge and other supporting skills, they can use creativity to improve the originality, quantity, and quality of their ideas and solutions to marketing problems’ (McCorkle et al, 2007, p 259)

Curiosity and Thinking

Another approach is that ‘... instead of pursuing learning in the form of students’ acquisition of knowledge, the focus should be on students’ exploration and appropriation of knowledge and marketing knowledge through their curiosity and thinking’ (Hill and McGinnis, 2007, p 52). This tact is explained as beginning with curiosity which then begets thinking, or questioning, which leads to learning.

Taking the Hill and McGinnis (2007) approach means that curiosity is sparked by exploration and vice versa. Curiosity underlies the most basic of questions: what, why, when, who, where. Once answered, curiosity ceases, exploration stops and thinking ends. However, activating curiosity again will begin the cycle.

The thinking that takes place may be (a) critical thought: '...evaluative questioning of things being considered as possible alternatives' (Hill and McGinnis, 2007, p 55), (b) reflective thought: '... focuses on questioning what has already occurred with an opportunity to make future changes to improve on something that has already taken place' (Ibid, p 55) and (c) creative thought: '... questioning that is open to identifying new and different things relating to a particular context' (Ibid, p 55). All three types of questioning are important to business activities in general and to marketing in particular. In the latter case, marketing efforts typically centre on successfully reaching a target market which is intended to give competitive advantage in the marketplace. Those marketers whose efforts and practices are successful must, oftentimes, outthink the competition strategically. This requires the ability (a) to think critically: where alternatives are evaluated, (b) to think reflectively: where actions and outcomes are evaluated after they happen and (c) to think creatively: to originate new alternatives.

Taking curiosity and thinking into the classroom means a shift in pedagogical approach from dissemination of knowledge, whereby students are informed about discipline theories and content, to initiating, encouraging and stimulating a thinking-orientation kindled by curiosity. As Hill and McGinnis (2007) explain, the thinking perspective bridges the classroom with real-world because students are exposed to the questions that marketers are likely to face when engaged with the competitive marketplace.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a group project that was completed as part of an undergraduate consumer behavior course at a Hong Kong university. The study data is derived from the work of three groups: each addressed the behavior of consumers towards mobile phone shopping activities.

Students were instructed to conduct observations that would inform them about the behavior of consumers in a shopping situation of their choice. The general format that was recommended to guide their observations was taken from Solomon (2008), and is shown in Table 1, following. They were asked to consider the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase facets of a consumption situation when observing and reporting their findings.

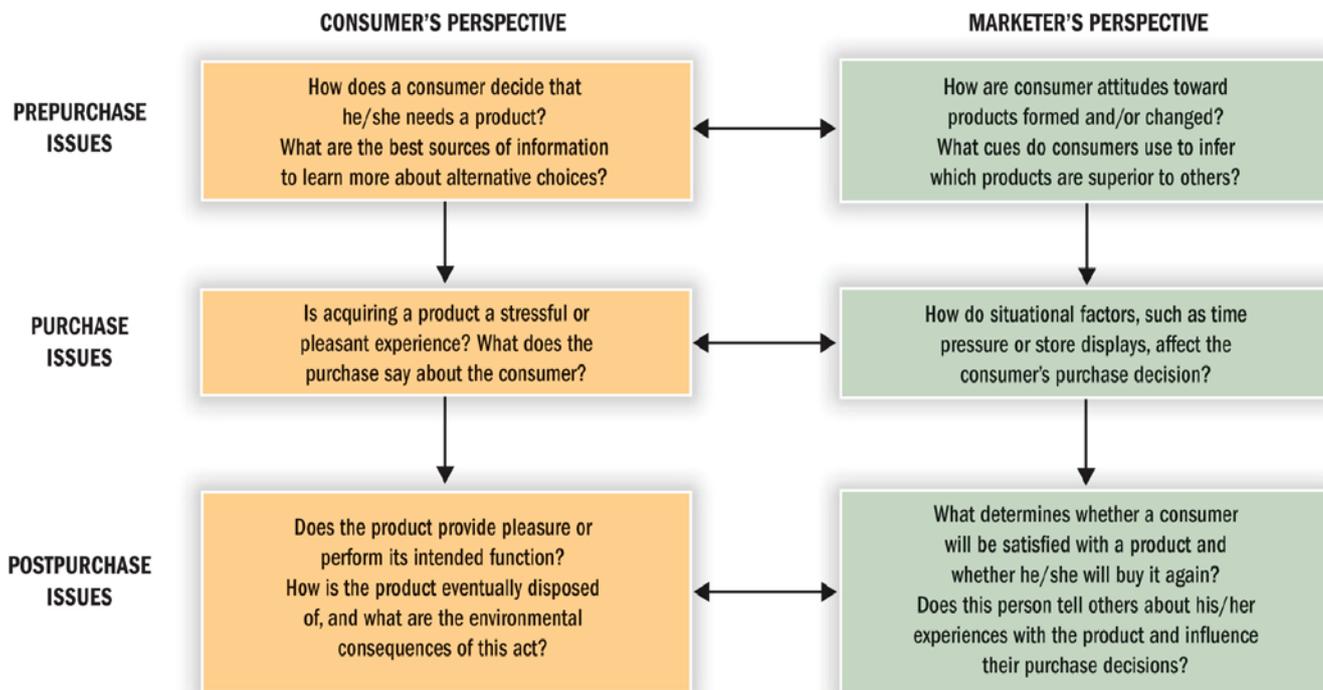
Each group was made up of six students. Three of the group members were to conduct the observations and report on the consumer's perspective after identifying various consumer segments. The remaining three group members were to select a target market and respond with the marketer's perspective for the chosen product. The students were also to report on the actual marketing activities that target the same segment(s) and to suggest whether, or not, those real-world efforts were effective in reaching the target market. It was anticipated that preparation of the final report would require discussions amongst the group members. Thus, efforts to combine the two parts would contribute to learning as each sub-group of three would have to explain the respective findings. The written project guidelines were given to the students during the second class of the semester allowing for sufficient time for both sub-groups to complete their parts within the specified deadlines. Additionally, during each subsequent class and week, the project directions were reiterated as 'pick a topic and go out and watch people'.

The three reports, named herein as study 1, study 2 and study 3, that represent the data for this paper all focused on mobile phones. Content analysis was used to review the information in the written reports that were submitted for grading. Each group earned a B grade or better.

Study 1 focused on young adults in the 18-26 years age group. It was guided by pre-purchase elements including time, route taken to reach the desired retail outlet and the degree of assistance required from salespeople. Interviews were conducted to verify observations. Study 2 encountered language and cultural barriers when conducting observations and, as a result, relied heavily on surveys to enhance the data. This study also focused on young adults in the age group 19-22 years and the observations were conducted in the same general vicinity of the city as study 1. Study 3 observed shoppers in an upscale mall. Of interest was use or purpose: what consumers

did with their phones, the brands that appeared popular to various consumer segments, and reference group behaviors in the purchase situation.

TABLE 1: SUB-GROUP TASKS, CONSUMER'S PERSPECTIVE AND MARKETER'S PERSPECTIVE



Source: Solomon, 2008, p 34

FINDINGS

Study 1

Student group 1 explored the mobile phone shopping behavior of 18-26 year olds. Initially, this group conducted surveys despite the task instructions being 'to go forth and observe'. After being cautioned by the professor that surveys, alone, would not earn them a decent grade, they went back into the field and collected data through observations.

Overall, study group 1 appeared to be very focused on the type of information they sought. They did not overwhelm their data collection with information greed but stayed focused on the task and topic. The structured format which was evident in their fieldwork carried forward into the report they wrote.

This group began by identifying four different store types where observations could be conducted: (1) Service provider stores, (2) Electronic appliance stores, (3) Specific brand stores, and (4) Local independent retailers. They then focused on specific behaviors and actions that could be observed with relative ease and still remain unobtrusive. These included: (1) how much time consumers spent in each shop, (2) what routes they used, their movements through a shop to locate a phone that interested them, (3) what types of phones they were looking for, and (4) the types of questions that they asked the sales staff.

After moving through the shopping area and observing the behavior of consumers, the group members moved away to discuss their observations. During this time, they reviewed what they had seen and what they still wanted

to know. Then, they returned to the fieldwork and asked to interview various consumers at the four types of stores.

Interviews enabled the group members to narrow the scope of information that could not easily be observed, including (a) the top three functions that consumers wanted in a mobile phone and (b) where consumers look for information about mobile phones prior to purchase. They identified that consumers looked for Wi-Fi, camera quality and music as the three most important functions. The top three information sources were the (1) internet, (2) friends and (3) visiting stores where they could talk to sales people, review sales literature as well as physically handle the phones.

A key finding that study group 1 reported was that distinctive shopping behaviors could be attributed to three main consumer groups according to the four store types that sold mobile phones.

Study 2

Student group 2 focused on the mobile phone shopping behavior of college age consumers and ultimately used gender as the segmentation variable. Initially this group conducted surveys online and then were reminded that the task involved observations of behaviors. They did, then, undertake fieldwork that involved observations. However, in their reporting of same, the description of their qualitative data collection filled only 17 lines in a 12 page report.

Overall, the data collection and reporting structure were guided by the variable responses for gender cross-tabulated with the various survey questions. Thus, similarities and differences, according to gender, became the focus of the report. Other demographics were not considered within the analysis other than to add description to gender.

As mentioned, the study group did conduct interviews but this was only after being cautioned about a survey-only submission. The interviews were held on-campus with a select few people that were part of their after-class social circle. The questions that were asked were open-ended within a structured format.

Throughout the report, this group countered their lack of observations by inserting 'industry observations'. These were intended to show their critique of actual marketing activities in the Hong Kong area. However, their comments about the 'real-world' they were witnessing were generalized assumptions and did not have evidence to back up their statements. For example, they reported that it is '... difficult to find a mall today ... which is without a mobile phone shop'. Although this suggests that they looked, it would have been a stronger statement had they mentioned what malls they had visited.

The report format used by student group 2 uses the headings pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages with the 4P's as sub-headings in each. Throughout every section, they fell back on the percentages and quantitative analysis taken from their online surveys. Findings from their observations were mentioned but with limited detail and buried within paragraphs. Lastly, this group summarized the behavior of consumers according to gender within a table that showed similarities and differences between men and women shopping for mobile phones. This table did reflect that the project objective, which included recognizing the behavior of consumers and the significance of this challenge to marketers, had been reached.

Study 3

Study group 3 considered the behavior of consumers between the ages of 18 and 30. However, rather than segment on age and any associated characteristics that are often aligned with that particular demographic, the descriptive terms 'trendsetters' and 'techies' were used to frame and describe the observed consumers.

The field study locations involved two malls on the Kowloon (mainland) side of Hong Kong. One was in a lower socio-economic area of the city while the other was an upscale mall situated very close to one of the region's popular universities.

Initially, the team members began by walking through the malls to watch for people using mobile phones. Of interest to them were issues such as (a) which make and model of phones were evident, (b) how the phones were being used, e.g. text, calls, games, etc, and (c) what activities were taking place as the phones were being used, e.g., window-shopping, consumers sitting at a coffee shop, etc.

After walking from one end of the mall to the other, the team members moved to a coffee shop where they continued to conduct their observations. They had found that when people are stationary – rather than walking – the use of mobile phones was more visible and thus, easier to observe. Here they continued to watch and then eventually engaged surrounding patrons in conversation to ask about mobile phone use. After completing the observations, the team members identified retail outlets that sold mobile phones and interviewed some of the sales staff. This information was used to corroborate what they had witnessed during their mall observations and supported their segmentation into the two groups – trendsetters and techies.

Key information that this group identified included (1) in situations where couples are together, one mobile phone device was always on display, (2) mobile phones spotted were medium or high-end devices, (3) consumers who appeared to be older than university age and part of the business community use Blackberry type mobiles while students use Nokia or Sony Ericsson, (4) male students tended to have Nokia mobile phones while females carried Sony Ericsson, (5) in coffee shops, the phones were frequently used for playing MP3's, and (6) in group settings, people tended to converse by SMS or by phone to someone outside the group rather than to engage in conversation with people close by in the group.

DISCUSSION

Notably, study group 1 used interviews to focus on information that they needed. As well, despite that they had conducted surveys prior to undertaking the observations they only used the quantitative information to inform their qualitative data collection. They did not report numbers or percentages which would have biased their observation results by overshadowing the qualitative with the quantitative. Interestingly, they gave descriptive names to the various segments they identified and included characteristics about each group within their report write-up. Overall, they were as true to the assignment as they could be within the time frame that was given to complete the project.

Study group 2 relied heavily on the surveys even though they were cautioned that the expectation for the task assignment was observations. It was the report writing that earned this project a B grade. The write-up was well-written and very well organized. It could not be downgraded substantially because 'behavior' issues were addressed throughout the document. Overall, however, it did not appear that the assigned exercise had contributed to any noticeable development of marketplace intuition. Students responded by rote with sufficient reference to behavior of consumers shopping for mobile phones; this fulfilled the task requirements and ultimately earned the grade.

The last project reviewed was study group 3. This team showed creative thinking in the way that the initial observations were conducted. When the group members walked through the mall, their focus was intently on the behavior of consumers; they watched for the visibility and the use of mobile phones. The findings they identified proved to be interesting and reflective. A significant weakness in their final report, however, was the extensive information about the various makes and models of mobile phones currently on the market. This detracted from the assigned task, behavior of consumers, and served to indulge the students' interests in the communication devices. The written report included pictures, listings of various features, and technological capabilities. The extent to which this introduced bias into the observation reflections is unknown but certainly cannot be dismissed.

Observations for intuitive reflections

Thus, results indicate that observations provide future marketers with opportunities to develop intuitive reflection, through curiosity and thinking, about marketplace conditions and consumers' behaviors. Conducting surveys was definitely the comfort zone for those studying marketing courses at the undergraduate level of this particular

Hong Kong university. Study group 2 included international exchange students, four Americans and one European, who also showed that their comfort zone is based on numbers-driven surveys.

However, the argument postulated in this paper is that without practicing observations and interpreting meaning, in marketing terms, about consumers' behaviors then the risk is that information gleaned from statistical analysis limits future marketers' understanding of real-world activities. Study group 1 appears to have benefited most from the observation activities followed by study group 3 and then study group 2. An important element for study group 1 was that they set the parameters for the information sought and kept within that framework while conducting the observations. As a result, the report write-up reflects what may be, arguably, the development of the curiosity and thinking skills that contribute to marketers' intuition, which is an important attribute for understanding about consumers' behavior. Study group 2, notably, did not appear to engage curiosity with thinking. Even though they were studying and living in new surroundings during the semester, they appeared not to be particularly interested in identifying similarities and differences to their own cultural environments. Comparatively, their work was weaker than the submitted reports from study group 1 and study group 3 and it could have been strengthened with more depth which would, arguably, have been a natural progression from curiosity.

LIMITATIONS

This consumer behavior course appears to be a good choice for sending students into the field to conduct observations; students can identify with actions that take place during shopping activities. A limitation, however, is the unknown whether students will ultimately take their learning into the workplace. Consumer behavior classes are typically positioned in a curriculum soon after the foundations or principles of marketing courses. This means that students have one to three years more to complete their undergraduate degree. Past research has shown that students who have completed a course in consumer behavior lose the knowledge gained within two years (Bacon and Stewart, 2006). Thus, conducting observations as a study task is limited when understanding is superficial. Knowledge is then lost quickly. Retention duration, according to Bacon and Stewart (2006), is extended if students acquire a deep understanding of the discipline application. Thus, depth has more value than breadth.

Although not stated in the report, the international exchange students in study group 2, who were to do the observations, admitted to cultural barriers that proved to be an impediment to their fieldwork. For the observations, they went to a very high density area of the city which is known for electronic-type products. Here, the crowds were overwhelming to these students and the need to bargain and haggle for products was not something that they typically experienced when shopping in their home countries. This definitely limited their contribution to the group's submitted work.

Finally, this paper reports on only three papers of the thirty-eight group projects that were submitted during for the semester. To fully assess whether the observations could be considered successful, all reports should be reviewed within the one semester or selected projects reviewed longitudinally over semesters. This suggests opportunities for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

The argument postulated in this paper is that assigning students to practice observations and then, to interpret meaning about consumers' behaviors are likely to inform the future marketers' understanding of real-world consumer activities. The thinking processes, critical, reflective and creative, that students' undergo to complete the task are intended to arouse curiosity. Students, arguably, then learn from connecting marketing theory with real-world practice. This paper reviews the content of three student projects, about consumers and mobile phones, from one consumer behavior course. The findings suggest that observations do contribute to students' learning more than the rote activities that typify survey activities. However, the depth of learning may differ given that curiosity intensity may vary across individuals and groups.

The data for this paper relies on the results from one consumer behavior course in one semester. Future research opportunities include extending the curiosity – thinking – learning approach to other subject matter and to assessments over more than one semester. As well, research that considers the curiosity- thinking – learning approach when two or more professors teach multiple sections of a course would provide important information about the potential influence from teaching style. The desired outcome from any such studies would be to improve the education quality and the experience for students.

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