Naturalistic Group Interviewing in China

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In this film, we argue that only certain qualitative methods are appropriate in a Chinese context, due to various aspects of Chinese culture which de-emphasize expressing one’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values openly. This film demonstrates how (1) presenting Chinese consumers with scenarios that they can relate to stimulates meaningful discussion, (2) breaching people’s expectations is what allows people to articulate underlying meaning systems, and (3) conducting interviews in naturally occurring social groups all lead to naturalistic discussions.

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The difficulties of engaging in qualitative research in China are well documented (Eckhardt 2004; Stening and Zhang 2007; Watkins-Mathys 2007). Some of the more prominent hurdles to overcome to get rich, insightful data in a Chinese context include a general tendency for people to be anxious in interview settings, and the reluctance of Chinese people to disclose their thoughts and opinions (Stening and Zhang 2007). Also, one’s place in the social hierarchy strongly influences how one responds to an interviewer (Eckhardt 2004). As marketing and consumer research becomes more global, the field of qualitative research needs to take a critical approach to the effectiveness of varying methodologies in varying cultural contexts.

In this film, we demonstrate a qualitative data collection method focusing on naturalistic group interviewing which is able to overcome many of the obstacles and result in rich, insightful data. Because attitudes, beliefs, opinions and values are formed at the group rather than the individual level in China, it is of the utmost importance not to separate the group process of developing these opinions and values from their content (Eckhardt and Houston 2007). We demonstrate how the method works visually in the accompanying film. It is important to demonstrate the method visually; reading transcripts alone cannot convey the type of interpersonal interactions that occurred during the interviews, nor can one get a sense of how comfortable and natural the discussions were.

The three primary methodologies used to create naturalistic discussions are (1) presenting Chinese consumers with scenarios that they can relate to, (2) breaching people’s expectations is what allows people to articulate underlying meaning systems, and (3) conducting interviews in naturally occurring social groups all lead to naturalistic discussions. It is important for us to understand how these methods can be beneficial because when conducting research in a setting like China, interpretation is one of the most crucial aspects of qualitative marketing research. The sensemaking process must necessarily include the participants themselves, the local research partners, and the primary researchers, who are typically English speakers (Watkins-Mathys 2007). The process is necessarily more complex, and often alternate methods are needed to be able to navigate these multiple voices and end up with rich insights. Boddy (2007) reports on the most common types of projective techniques used in the Asia-Pacific region, and scenario completion is not one of them. We hope our introduction of this method leads to its increased usage in this region.

Additionally, naturalistic group interviewing can be utilized more in consumer culture research in numerous cultural contexts beyond the Chinese context. Although researchers periodically call for work that examines the social construction of various consumption activities, there has been very limited work which specifically uses the group as the unit of analysis. Ritson and Elliott (1999) studied how advertising meanings were socially constructed, and Coupland (2005) studied household dynamics in decision making, but there are scant other examples besides these. Naturalistic group interviewing can be a way to study social interactions and dynamics if one is not able to conduct a full-scale ethnography.

REFERENCES