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IPSOS VIEWS

The role of surveys in the age of behavioural science

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Introduction

It's fair to say that Behavioural Science is now the subject of a huge amount of discussion and activity within the research industry. The opportunity to apply the vast amount of academic work in this area to solve commercial and public sector challenges has at last been realised. The work of people such as Daniel Kahneman, Richard Thaler, Cass Sunstein, Dan Ariely and Gerd Gigerenzer has not only contributed to our understanding of human behaviour but have hugely popularised the discipline.

Behavioural Science does not enjoy a very precise definition in the same way as, for example, physics or biology. But much of the popular conception of this emerging discipline draws on the psychology of 'judgement and decision making' as a means of explaining human behaviour. Implicit within this is the claim that human decision makers have little or no access to the processes underlying their choices. The notion that self-reporting could be misleading was presented 30 years ago in a highly influential paper by Nisbett and Wilson (1977)¹ who argued that people have "little or no introspective access" to their cognitive processes. Their case was based on a wide-ranging review of evidence indicating that people cannot correctly report on the cognitive processes underlying complex behaviours such as judgement, choice, inference, and problem solving.

This clearly creates a dilemma for market research as the industry's methods typically rely on self-reporting. There can be an assumption that we have access to our inner selves. As the awareness

of Behavioural Science grows, there is growing alarm that the notional value of the self-reporting methods of market research could be a mistake. This would mean that we cannot rely on surveys and focus groups to understand human behaviour and need to turn instead to observed behaviour to derive consumer insights.

However, as ever with the task of understanding human behaviour, it is not necessarily as binary a question as this. There are still good reasons to ask people questions. It is too simplistic to assume that we are not able to self-report anything of value. As many philosophers and social scientists point out, our everyday personal experience tells us that this is simply not true. We are able to account for many of our behaviours and decide what we want to do in a perfectly sensible way. The challenge is to understand the qualifications and boundaries of the different techniques for understanding human behaviour.

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¹ Nisbett, R. and T. Wilson (1977). "Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes." *Psychological Review* 84(3): 231-259.

As market research practitioners, we have a harder job than academics who have the luxury of being able to focus on seeking evidence that supports their particular view of the world. Boundaries and qualifications are of less importance than demonstrating the breadth and depth of their perspective. Our job is different – we have practical challenges for which we need to find solutions and as such use the best tools available. There is no point in using a chisel when (in actual fact) a screwdriver is much more effective. We need to know when to use a chisel and when to use a screwdriver.

On this point, there is much debate about whether there is a need to continue to ask people questions. If, the argument goes, we are not reliable witnesses of our own behaviours, then what value is there of surveys and focus groups? And this is very much a live debate with, for example, the global research head of an FMCG brand recently posing Ipsos the following challenge – *“We know that people are poor judges of their own behaviour and context changes everything. Should we not then spend all our budget on observational studies and data?”* It is clear that market research needs a coherent answer to this issue.

This paper sets out six key points that, as an industry, we need to consider before we run the risk of throwing out babies with bath water. Our conclusion: whilst there are significant opportunities for insights from new sources, there remains a very important place for asking consumers questions.

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1. Are we really as misguided as is suggested?

Daniel Kahneman, one of the founders of Behavioural Science, famously suggested that the way we make decisions is through one of two approaches:

- **Intuition** (or *system 1*): fast and automatic, using mental shortcuts
- **Reasoning** (or *system 2*): slower and more volatile, as it is subject to conscious judgements and attitudes

System 1 decisions are likely to be “good enough” for much of the time but can also lead to less than optimal outcomes given we are using shortcuts to arrive at conclusions.

Does system 1 mean surveys are not relevant?

We do need to challenge the premise that most consumer behaviours are ‘system 1’ and therefore automatic, making them beyond reach of the self-reflection asked for in surveys.

A couple of points are relevant here:

- **Interchangeability:** It is clear that we often invoke system 1 processing, as humans tend to operate as “cognitive misers”. Nevertheless, we are clearly capable of interrupting this by invoking system 2. But what might spark this can vary from one person to the next depending on what is important for them. I may idly be choosing toothpaste but recollection of my sensitive teeth could make me stop and consider my options more carefully.

- **Continuum not a dichotomy:** The notion that system 1 and system 2 are qualitatively different to each other is misguided. We might want to think of these as modes rather than types of processing, which means they are more interchangeable than is often assumed. For example, it is possible to carry out analytical reasoning both in a slow and careful manner as well as quickly and casually. Or indeed any point in between.

So the notion that consumer behaviour is mainly automatic and therefore not accessible to questioning is not wholly accurate. Of course, there are environmental factors and mental processes that shape our behaviour but these explanations are not incompatible with the role of conscious thought.

In fact, psychologist Itamar Simonson argues that whilst assertions that “*context and task characteristics can impact preferences are not in doubt, some of the most prominent demonstrations of preference construction have arguably had limited relevance and have tended to exaggerate the degree to which preferences are constructed.*”² So he is essentially urging caution in overstating the importance of system 1 alone in determining behaviours.

To further make the point, a recent paper by psychologists Newell and Shanks reviews the literature and supports the premise that our inner lives appear to be much more accessible to self-reporting than many researchers assume.³

² Simonson, Itamar (2007) Will I Like A “Medium” Pillow? Another Look At Constructed And Inherent Preferences

³ Newell, B.R. & Shanks, D.R. (2014). Unconscious Influences on Decision Making- A Critical Review. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 37, 1-63.

Of course, for certain choices in certain contexts we are not reliable witnesses of our own inner states or determinants of our behaviour (see the various studies on 'choice blindness for example).⁴ But the role of the research practitioner is to understand when, where and why this is likely to be the case and make the appropriate selection of tools as a result.

Surveys are often good predictors of behaviour

It is important to note that respondents are often good at anticipating their own behaviours. We know that surveys often generate high predictive validity of consumer outcomes. For example, many of the concept, product and copy testing tools used by Ipsos have been shown to be highly predictive of subsequent market behaviour. There is a more general point that the market research industry needs to be clearer about the types of research questions and techniques that are strongly predictive of behavioural outcomes and where the relationship is less direct.

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⁴ Hall L, Johansson P, Tärning B, Sikström S, & Deutgen T (2010). Magic at the marketplace: Choice blindness for the taste of jam and the smell of tea. *Cognition*, 117 (1), 54-61 PMID: 20637455

2. Sometimes we do actually need to understand what goes on in consumers' minds

As Matthew Salganik of Princeton University points out,⁵ *“Researchers who study dolphins can’t ask them questions. So, dolphin researchers are forced to study behaviour. Researchers who study humans, on the other hand, should take advantage of the fact that our participants can talk.”*

He goes on to point out that some of the most important social outcomes and predictors are internal states, such as emotions, knowledge, expectations, and opinions. Internal states exist only inside people’s heads, and sometimes the only way to learn about internal states is to ask.

We might be able to eventually derive that a customer was unhappy about their recent experience by

observing the way in which they stop spending money and take their business elsewhere. *But it may be quicker, easier and more profitable to simply ask them. We will not get there by observation alone.*

Part of the point here is that we need to make a distinction between the reliability of, on the one hand, our ability to self-report our mental states and, on the other, what has determined those mental states i.e. what we are thinking and feeling versus *why* we are thinking and feeling that way. Many of the criticisms of the market research industry confound these two very different points – but in fact this distinction is well understood and respected by researchers. We need to make sure that when we ask questions, we are asking the right ones.



⁵ Salganik, Matthew J. 2017. *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Open review edition.

3. Every approach has its limitations

Whilst the limitations of one methodology can drive us into the welcoming arms of another, we may slowly start to realise that this one too has limitations. As such, we need to be careful about what we can learn from simply observing behaviour, which is often considered to be an alternative to asking questions.

Observational data is an excellent means of developing hypotheses about what drives behaviour – but it requires a human to move from data to insight. We can do this through the use of analytical/theory based frameworks but this is still fundamentally a subjective process.⁶ In order to move to something less subjective we need to do experimental work. This means we are typically reducing the number of variables we are looking at to something manageable. This has the unfortunate consequence of not properly reflecting the multi-variable nature of the consumer behaviour we are interested in and thus limits its value. So, for example, if we want to conduct an experiment on shopper behaviour, we need to select a small number of variables to consider whilst keeping others constant. This is in an environment where there is a multitude of factors driving behaviours: pricing, packaging, customer service, lighting and so on.

There are also logistical challenges of using observed data. In the 1970s and 1980s in-market testing was widely used for copy testing and new product testing. However, this fell out of favour for a number of reasons – it was expensive, difficult to execute, too slow and easy for competitors to disrupt your test or copy you. Even your own sales force could distort results of a new product test (by driving up sales) because they knew it was a test and they wanted a new product to sell. In-market testing was replaced by survey-based tools which had none of these weaknesses and were found to be just as accurate because they could be better controlled. In these studies, there was an attempt to mimic behaviour by having consumers make choices from a competitive set (sometimes in a real or simulated store and sometimes just in-survey). Over time, things moved away from a behavioural orientation to gain speed and cost. These same issues have not changed.

So replacing asking people with observation is not a panacea. Every approach has limitations.

⁶ Gitelman, Lisa (ed.), 'Raw Data' is an Oxymoron, The MIT Press, 2013

4. What model of humans do we believe in?

Whilst the fact that we can derive huge amounts of insight from observational data is not disputed⁷, we do need to question what we are missing in an account of human behaviour that is derived from observation alone. If we are not careful, we are in danger of assuming that we have no internal life that shapes our behaviour.

We need to ask if we believe humans to be simple creatures that are driven by learnt associations or individuals whose behaviour is determined by meaning and cultural context. The answer is probably both. The point is that what we choose depends on the questions we are trying to answer. But to suggest that one model has legitimacy oversimplifies the complex reality of human behaviour.

The market research industry is generally poor at articulating the theoretical underpinning of the profession. But it is a mistake to assume that it does not exist. Surely the fact that much of market research has traditionally used introspective techniques means we have a model of humans which, at the very least, suggests some level of a stable inner life. Which in turn means we have some level of free will that determines our behaviour.

Critics of market research often suggest that our inner life is merely the by-product of our neuronal activity or unconscious processes. Philosopher Mary Midgley deals with this in a very eloquent way:⁸

“Zombies are supposed to be creatures that act exactly like human beings, but filleted ones, with the consciousness removed. This bizarre idea assumes that consciousness is a removable item like an appendix – a sort of paralysed soul, one that has no effect on behaviour. This is the Behaviourist myth. The most obvious reason why it can’t be true is that so much of our activity is drastically shaped by effort and therefore by attention, which can’t be unconscious. Of course there is also a great deal that is unconscious. But that unconscious part can only work while attention constantly stands by to deal with choices when they come up.”

⁷ Strong, Colin (2015). Humanising Big Data. Kogan Page

⁸ Midgley, Mary (2004) Zombies can’t concentrate. Philosophy Now

These points indicate the need for the market research industry to articulate more clearly a view on 'what it means to be human.' Do we consider that humans are a set of learned neuronal responses and that our minds are simply the by-product of post-hoc rationalising brain cell activity? Or do we consider humans as sentient beings with free will and consciousness? Different views are allowed and are implicit in our practices but they need to be surfaced, shared and challenged. Research agencies need a point of view on these issues but leave no mistake – asking questions implies a perfectly legitimate model of human behaviour, albeit perhaps not a complete one ignoring the realm and influence of the nonconscious.

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5. We need to ask questions better

It is important to note that the way we ask questions does need to improve in a number of ways. First, we need to avoid the temptation to ask questions simply 'because we can'. Just as a street trader hawking their wares intuitively learns the effective ways of generating sales, so the market researcher learns the boundaries of what it is possible to ask respondents without resulting in spurious responses. Whilst a huge body of work sits alongside this tacit knowledge to guide best practice, the rise of online interviewing has meant practitioners increasingly no longer hear the respondent as they struggle to answer unreasonable questions. The industry as a whole needs to ensure that proper piloting of questionnaires is budgeted and the time allocated for that to take place.

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There is an opportunity to include new forms of indirect questions, time-pressured response techniques and cognitive load methods allowing us to track implicit attitudes and system 1 style processing. Much of these are not only validated techniques but, because we can include them in surveys, they allow us to develop scalable measures. Nevertheless, we also need a more thoughtful approach for when, where and how implicit and explicit measures differ. Too often explanations are highly subjective without any form of theoretical framework to act as a set of guiding principles.

But the overarching point to be made is that simply because market research has at times made itself an easy target by asking the wrong questions does not then mean that the principle is flawed. The industry needs a better statement of the boundaries of when to ask questions and to ensure that they are well executed.



6. Why we need integrated approaches

There are clearly limitations to asking questions. We are not always good at recalling details of low involvement activity, particularly if this happened some time ago. Our ability to determine why we behave in certain ways is limited.

Good market researchers have always known this and taken steps to adjust for these limitations. Added to this, we are now in an era where there is unprecedented data available which offers granular information about often very intimate behaviours in a very unobtrusive manner on a longitudinal basis.

Indeed, we can even derive new insights about consumers' inner lives from examining the patterns in the data.

This calls for what every good researcher knows – we need to triangulate data sources to arrive at solutions we can be confident about. If a consistent picture of a behaviour and the factors influencing it is obtained from more than one source and using more than one method, it increases confidence in the analysis.



Conclusion

Understanding consumer behaviour is a complex activity. Whilst it is always tempting to look for explanations that are simple, the reality is that we run the risk of simply making another set of mistaken over-claims. The case is clear – we need to continue to ask questions.

However, it is also critically important for market research to adopt integrative approaches. We are hugely excited about the opportunities afforded by using more observational methods. Indeed, the industry has been at the heart of new thinking and new approaches to leverage these valuable new sources of consumer insights.

We are now in an environment where we have a much wider range of data, whereas we once often only had surveys and focus groups. Working with our clients, Ipsos is heavily engaged in identifying and leveraging the value of these different sources. The challenge we now have is to intelligently and empirically articulate the boundaries of the different sources within our practice – for the strength of any area is not only knowing when it applies but also when it does not.

Five reasons why we still need to ask questions

1. Most academic research indicates that we are **reasonably reliable witnesses** of much of our lives. Market research has always known and been respectful of the limits of this.
2. Sometimes we do need to know how consumers **feel** and what they **believe**. There is no sensible alternative in these instances to asking questions.
3. All approaches **have their limitations**. Alternatives to asking questions are no exception. Observation, for example, whilst highly useful also suffers from known pitfalls.
4. Asking people questions reflects a belief that *how we think and feel* shapes **how we decide to act**. We therefore need to ask questions to understand how consumers are likely to behave.
5. Any instances of poor questionnaire design do not automatically mean that asking questions is wrong. The market research industry needs to ensure that **standards are maintained** but we also continue to innovate on ways to ask questions in smarter ways.

Integrative approaches are the future; we need to continue to ask questions but also use techniques such as ethnography, data analytics and experimental designs to ensure a total consumer understanding.

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