THE USE OF VISUAL DISCRIMINATION TECHNOLOGY IN CROSS CULTURAL RESEARCH FOR BUSINESS
A QUALITATIVE METHOD FOR CROSS CULTURAL BUSINESS RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

QUALITATIVE research methods have been popular for years in the marketplace and in the social sciences (Frank, 1998), but have not been as well received by business research academicians. The issues often raised deal with problems of focus and interpretation (Doucet et al, 1998; Chenail, 1997). Thompson (1998) characterizes problems of perspective in interpretation of qualitative data, discussing "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. Interpretation is seen in a continuum, with outsiders taking a judgmental authoritative type position, while insiders contribute experiential, empathetic interpretation. Chenail (1997), discusses the dangers of qualitative research with respect to focus and alignment. He points out, how through qualitative research, one can get off track in researching the information one really needs, developing "Plumb Lines" to keep researchers on track. Jones (1997) suggests that both quantitative and qualitative methods be used mixed in research in order to balance their relative strengths and weaknesses. Wolfer (1998) reinforces the strengths of experiential interpretation in attempts to establish a foundation for qualitative data analysis. This paper does not investigate methods of interpretation or champion the advantages of qualitative research relative to quantitative. It is merely to introduce an innovative qualitative technique, which appears to hold promise for cross cultural business research. Issues of interpretation, will no doubt, be raised with this methodology, as with other qualitative methods. However, for those brave enough to weather the storm of academic scrutiny and the courage to see the value in the outcomes, this methodology will prove interesting and potentially beneficial.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a powerful and compelling marketing research methodology to the international academic business research community. The methodology has been developed by Mr. Michael Sack of Image Engineering/Quali-Quant, Inc., and has been used by Sack for cross-cultural research in countries around the world. Labeled "visual discrimination" and "visual grammar©," it borrows from conventional qualitative focus group and interview research. The method goes beyond these traditional qualitative methods, which subjects respond to facilitating questions by choosing images, rather than by responding verbally. Meaningful results are found in patterns that emerge from the pictures when grouped with responses of other similar respondents.

Sack's methodology is compelling because it provides a simple method by which some serious cultural barriers can be minimized. Language becomes less of a research barrier than is true with other forms of research (www.coe.uga.edu). In addition, visual discrimination methodology bypasses the internalized psychological "screens" which censor and control the "acceptable" words, subjects might use to respond verbally to research questions. From these observations, it would seem that visual discrimination research methodology is a tool, which should be added to the international business researchers' toolbox.

Design

One author of this paper has been involved in working with Sack in the use of visual discrimination methodology in conducting cross-cultural research for several countries under a research grant. Three of the

countries were researched – Bulgaria, Jamaica, and the United States of America. The studies conducted in these countries will be used as the basis for explanation and illustration of the methodology, with the understanding that the methodology itself can be used over a great variety of applications (including positioning, brand imaging, consumer purchase motivation, etc.). The purpose of the paper is not the study of the countries mentioned, but an introduction of the methodology.

A discussion of the practical aspects of the research methodology is followed by illustrations of selected results on key concepts for the countries studied. A short concluding discussion on possible research applications follows this.

Methodology

Images
Five to eight thousand images are typically used in this research. Images have been collected for many years from newspapers, magazines and internet sources. They are stored in a digitalized, coded data base. There are over 12,000 images in the database. They include every conceivable type of scene, person, or object. Pictures are catalogued, and image selection can be tracked across studies.

Physical Site Selection
The interview location must accommodate two types of usage/activity:

1) Display of the images

2) A space to sit and work for those being interviewed

A room that is 20 'by 20' is ample and comfortable. Each person needs twice the normal space that they would require to merely sit in. They need space to create collages/montages on folded easel pad paper and to be able to access the common supplies (tape, scissors, etc.). It is useful to have easel stands available, but not absolutely necessary.

Moderator Selection
A best (generic) description of our moderators includes:

- Language skills – English and a local language

- Curiosity and a strong desire to help, support, and please are useful character traits

- Best moderators either have the presence of a school teacher or a politician; they either never met a bad child and/or a stranger

- Experience managing groups of people is very helpful

- Someone who has internal strength and resolve is the best sought description

The above description usually results in hiring a middle-aged woman or alternatively, a very charming middle-aged man (popular with women & children).

Recruiting
Recruitment specifications should correspond to specific issues and needs of the group asking for the cultural assessment research. For the purposes of our research, the following is a generic (default) recruitment specs followed:

A. Recruited for eight group discussions, with twelve people being recruited and the expectation that eight to twelve would be present for the interview.

1.	Males	Age 8-14	5.	Females	Age 8-14
2.	Males	Age 18-29	6.	Females	Age 18-29
3.	Males	Age 30-39	7.	Females	Age 30-39
4.	Males	Age 40-54	8.	Females	Age 40-54

Note: Two practice groups are usually conducted, one of men age 30-50, and one of women age 30-50.

B. Respondents must represent the average population, or members of a specific people group.

C. Respondents are required to have an average amount of education for the population (literacy is not mandatory, but useful).

Day workers collected from a common meeting point are to be carefully avoided. They are easy to recruit and are often neither local nor average.

D. No two members of the same family should attend the same session, different sessions are acceptable, but not ideal.

E. Friends, co-workers, neighbors, people who know each other well should also not attend the same session, if it is possible to avoid.

F. People in the local marketing, advertising and market research professions should be excluded from these interviews.

Note: When multiple people groups are interviewed in one culture, a minimum of four group sessions must be conducted for each to obtain useful results.

Discussion Guidelines

Introduction of Project
Moderator introduces the project to subjects, puts them at rest, discuss purpose of the project and reiterates how long they will be there.

Introduction of Process
Moderator explains to subjects that they will do three different types of work in this meeting: group discussion, use of images to convey ideas and attitudes, and individually work with images.

Discussion Warm-up
Moderator trains subjects to be comfortable using the pictures with a warm up exercise. Subjects are instructed on how to choose images to answer questions regarding their favorite children's story, then give an opportunity to purge by discussing their answers.

Questions for Discussion
Moderator leads group in a discussion of topics, subjects expect to discuss in cross-cultural research, facilitating their thinking responsiveness.

Group Photo Sorts
Moderator leads group to image selection for each of the following categories. Each category includes bi-polar concepts to capture the range of psychological responses. Some selected categories include the following:

Today vs. Ten Years From Now – Perceptions of the present and hopes for the future.

Joy vs. Hardship – Perceived best and worst aspects of the culture.

Men vs. Women – Views of the genders.

Power vs. Peace – Constructs representing keys to personal/cultural power and peace.

Trust vs. Deceit – Images representing basic concepts, who can be trusted, who can not.

Individual Photo Sort-Shared Time – The last part of the research process involves subjects selecting images reflecting internal constructs, in the studies cited, subjects selected images reflecting the ideal self.

Data Collection and Analysis

The images are collected patterns analyzed by target grouping. A team of researchers, which included a clinical psychologist, conduct the analysis for these studies. Patterns emerge for most of the concepts, which are easily identified by the professionals. Conclusions are reached when team members come to a consensus on the meaning of patterns.

Selected Results

The studies of Bulgaria, Jamaica and the United States resulted in a great deal of complex data. A small representation of the data is presented below to illustrate the power and quality of the research technique. Of the list of concepts researched, two have been selected for illustrative purposes. They were selected for the purpose of displaying comparisons and contrasts between cultures. The concepts illustrated are women's views of men and the concept of trust.

Women's View of Men (See Exhibit One)

This exhibit displays a common theme for the three countries, but variances in intensity of attitudes. Jamaican women see men as irresponsible but irresistible scoundrels and dogs. US women see men as hopelessly lost but cute at best and as snakes at worst, while Bulgarian women hold men in utter disdain. It is interesting to note that women in most cultures chose pictures of dogs to represent men. In some cultures (Jamaica and the US), the dogs are cute. In others (Russia for instance), the dogs were vicious and cruel. The three sets of images displayed reveal somewhat different attitudes and tolerances toward men in their cultures. In Bulgaria, men simply aren't to be trusted by women at all. Other picture sort data reveals that women in Bulgaria see their "sexual currency" as the primary means of attaining status, material wealth and power. Middle aged women, who are loosing this power, resent the men who place such a high value on this sexual currency. In Jamaica, the research clearly reveals women as industrious and achieving, while men dream very big but are underachievers. The women see the men as fun loving philanderers who accomplish little and do not meet even family obligations. In the US, middle aged women shift their perspective of men from being cuddly little irresponsible and naïve dogs, to a view of men as half-brained, insensitive and sometimes cruel.

The attitudes in each culture are reflective of socio-cultural influences and trends. Bulgarian men feel themselves to be very ineffectual – a view shared by women, who are victims of the consequent frustration and feelings of powerlessness. In Jamaica, men "come of age" by fathering children, and tend to hold visions of fame and
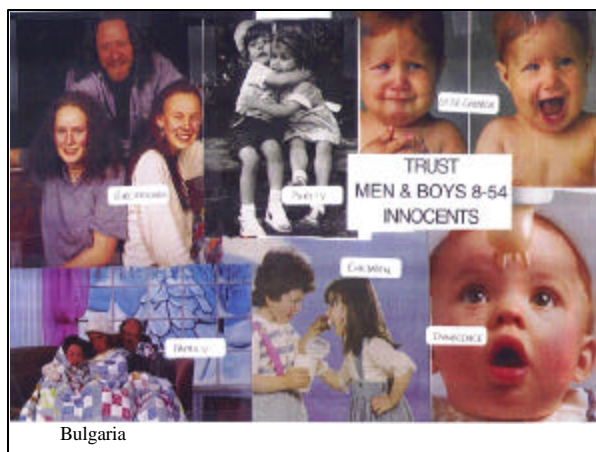

Bulgaria

Bulgaria

Exhibit 1 – Figure 1.   **Exhibit 1 – Figure 2.**

Exhibit 1 – Figure 3.

Exhibit 1 – Figure 4.

Exhibit 1 – Figure 5.

Exhibit 1 – Figure 6.

Exhibit 1 – Women's View of Men

wealth, while dropping out of school and seeing traditional occupations and entry level jobs as demeaning. Women, who tend to be better educated and less discriminating in their willingness to pursue jobs, grow impatient with these attitudes. In the US, women tire of men who are emotionally shallow and who sometimes in midlife choose to abandon longtime partners for the allure of younger women. These phenomena are reflected in the picture sets displayed.

Concept of Trust (See Exhibit Two)

One of the few consistent findings, the authors found in the cross-cultural research was the universality of images related to trust. In each culture researched, trust is represented by infants (primarily) and by grandparents. Displayed in exhibit two, are some of the images that represent the concept of trust in Bulgaria, Jamaica and the US. In the Bulgarian study we found that trust of any adult is almost non existent in the culture. However, consistent with the findings introduced, trust is represented by innocents – babies and grandparents. The Jamaican images revealed that overall, people of color are trusted above Caucasians, but, once again, innocents – babies and grandparents may be trusted regardless of color. In the US image sets, TV celebrities and politicians were NOT to be trusted – but once again, babies and grandparents were images that did represent trust. As previously stated, the consistency of babies and grandparents represents a rare cross cultural construct.
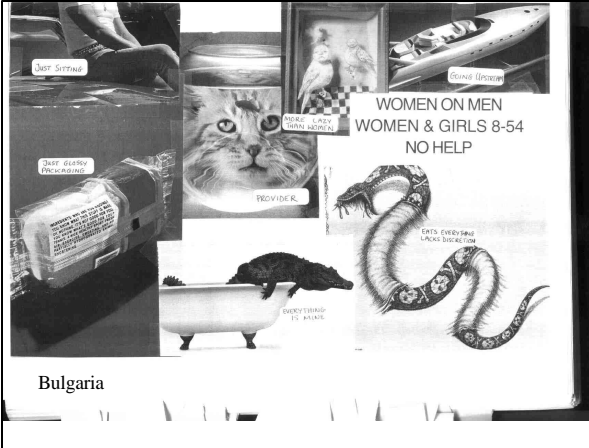
Exhibit 2 – Figure 1.

Exhibit 2 – Figure 2.

Exhibit 2 – Figure 3.

Exhibit 2 – Figure 4.

Exhibit 2 – Figure 5.

Exhibit 2 – Figure 6.

Exhibit 2 – Concept of Trust

Other Constructs

The examples given are simply for illustration in this paper. A more complete presentation of the comparisons and contrasts between cultures reveals some very useful information on different sensitivities in the cultures. The differences range from views of the "outside world" to social views, to deeper views of the "inner self." These differences provide valuable insights for effective business communication. The methodology is suited to provide information for global general business strategy, organizational development strategy, promotional strategy and human resource management.

Conclusion

These examples merely serve to demonstrate the richness available in this type of research. Many examples and illustrations will be presented in the conference attendant to this paper. In each of the countries researched by this method to date, constituents of the culture have confirmed the accuracy of the findings. The research methods have been used for the successful launches of many new products in Europe and Asia with companies such as Unilever, for positioning and branding applications, for consumer divisions of companies such as Kraft and Clorox, and for a host of marketing and human resource projects for Marriott Corporation.

The research methodology appears to have a great deal of usefulness. Researchers might have hesitations in adopting this methodology. One reason is that it is an innovative method, which is new to the research discipline. One plausible explanation for the slowness by which researchers are turning to this method is the question of interpretation. Qualitative marketing research, though very valuable to practitioners, does not provide the type of structured findings, which the academic world is so found of. Researchers (particularly those in academia) are much more comfortable with deviations from means than they are with interpreting qualitative data. However, the inability to force data onto bar graphs and into variance tables should not prevent researchers from adopting this powerful provider of quality information.

The value of focusing on the affective dimension of market behavior is undeniable, given the success of such consumer giants as Budweiser, McDonalds and Coca-Cola. Seldom do any of these companies strategically orient their marketing thrusts to cognitive dimensions of product attributes and benefits. They sell image and emotional positioning. Each has demonstrated a knack for developing promotional strategy, which identifies core cultural, or sub cultural values and plays to them. Visual discrimination methods are a tool, which can aid strategists in determining what values are and what types of images effectively communicate those values.

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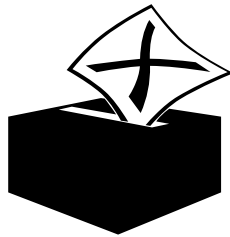
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