More Questions than answers? A Critical examination of the use of projective techniques in political brand image research

Introduction

Since the 1940s market research has “borrowed” (Boddy 2005:242) projective techniques from the field of psychology with some success and they are now commonly used in qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the research area (Boddy 2005). It has been suggested that projective techniques may provide an insight into consumers’ views on brands, delving beneath the surface of explicitly stated attitudes, associations and perceptions (Kay 2001; Day 1989). Projective techniques have been adopted by many disciplines to investigate personality, behaviour (Noble et al., 2007), mental disorders (Anderson and Anderson 1951), and motivations (Bell 1948). They can encourage emotional and rational insight (Boddy 2004) and reveal associations (De Carlo et al., 2009, Moutinho, et al., 2007). However, doubts have been raised about the validity and reliability of this research method, and there is little research critically evaluating the technique. Responding to this identified gap in the literature this paper critically examines the use of projective techniques in political brand image research and provides a systematic framework that can be used more generally when analysing and interpreting projective data.

The paper focused on political marketing and utilised a number of projective techniques to explore the notion of the brand image of the UK Conservative Party amongst young citizens aged 18-24 years. Mengxia (2007:36) describes brand image as “the set of mental representations, emotional and/or cognitive”, which are reflected in the associations and perceptions held in the consumer’s memory (Bosch et al., 2006).

Debates and Definitions

According to Anderson and Anderson (1951:3) the definition of projective techniques has acquired “broad and undifferentiated” meaning, resulting in no universally agreed definition (Bell 1948; Boddy 2005). Consequently, it remains a “highly contested” research instrument in many disciplines (Anderson and Anderson 1951; Ramsey et al., 2006:567). Psychology for example, can be divided into three traditions; experimental, statistical and clinical. However, each tradition approaches projective techniques from a different perspective (Anderson and Anderson 1951). Experimental and Statistical traditions tend to adopt a positivist perspective focusing on objectivity, reliability and measurement whereas the Clinical tradition tends to lean towards a more interpretive perspective, (Anderson and Anderson 1951:29). Nevertheless, each tradition “is concerned with the same objective of discovering verifiable knowledge” (Anderson and Anderson 1951:29). Qualitative marketing research practitioners have distanced themselves from psychoanalytical projective techniques by adopting a more “pedestrian and pragmatic” approach to using projective techniques which can elicit feelings and attitudes which otherwise may remain hidden (Boddy 2005:241).

Murstein (1963:1) suggests that some projective techniques emphasise measurable responses whilst other projective techniques can be used “in an un-standardised manner with less preoccupation with quantitative enumeration”. He goes further by classifying qualitative projective techniques as projective techniques and quantitative projective techniques as projective tests (Murstein 1962:1). Moreover, projective techniques are useful in both quantitative and qualitative research and the selection will ultimately be determined by the research purpose, and the researchers’ philosophical standpoint (Boddy 2005). Doubts have been raised regarding the use projective techniques in terms of reliability, validity and
generalisability (Noble et al., 2007; Ramsey et al., 2006) and a major limitation is that projective techniques may reveal more of the inner world of the researcher rather than the perceptions and associations of the participant (Bell 1948; Boddy 2005; Ramsey et al., 2006). Furthermore projective techniques are often described as ambiguous (Pettigrew 2008) and vague (Baines and Chansarkar 2002). However, for Boddy (2005:247) projective techniques allow respondents to express themselves “in fuller, more subtle ways than they could in direct questioning” and that makes projective techniques so rewarding to market researchers, (Ramsey et al. 2006). Projective techniques are helpful when providing stimulus material for ice-breakers (Barbour 2007), energising participants and ideal for dealing with sensitive information (Baines and Chansarkar 2002; Boddy 2005), that participant’s maybe reluctant to share (Pettigrew 2008). Besides, the practice of cross-checking data from different techniques can be adopted to add validity to the analysis (Boddy 2005). Finally, projective techniques are relatively easy to administer (Hammer 1958; Langford and McDonagh 2003), used independently or incorporated to enhance interviews and focus groups, (Ramsey et al., 2006; Day 1989). Consequently, the application of projective techniques is troublesome but the benefits of a rigorous methodological approach can ameliorate the disadvantages.

**Typologies and applications**

There are many varieties of projective techniques (Anderson and Anderson 1951; Boddy 2005; Mick 1986; Vince and Broussine 1996). These can be subdivided into five categories

- **association** - connecting the research subject with images and thoughts,
- **completion** - the idea of finishing sentences, stories or arguments,
- **construction** - annotating a series of speech and thought bubbles,
- **expressive** - projecting metaphorical expressions in the form of drawings, and
- **choice Ordering** – the employment of a ranking system.

(Hofstede et al. 2007:301; Sijtsema et al. 2007).

Each category can be used to ascertain a specific area of insight with not one category taking precedence and the number of categories adopted will be at the discretion of the researcher (Hofstede et al. 2007). There are calls for researchers to be trained and experienced when interpreting projective techniques (Murstein 1963; Boddy 2005) but “some practitioners argue that some projective techniques are so basic that any academic or researcher should have little problem” (Boddy 2005:247). According to Hammer (1958) there are many empirical models available for analysing projective expressions but he takes a positivist clinical approach to the analysis and interpretation of projective techniques.

Hofstede et al. (2007:305) suggests that “the most current way of analysing the results of projective research methods is by looking at the overall impression the participants associative activities make” therefore proposing an holistic approach. Other approaches to the analysis of projected expressions have focused upon a thematic analysis, exploring key patterns, relationships and emerging themes (Noble et al. 2007). This approach is useful but required a form of qualitative content analysis that teased out similarities (Boddy 2005). Although there are difficulties in producing standardised responses when analysing projective techniques, researchers should also value the uniqueness of responses (Bell 1948). Interpretation should be objective, rigorous and systematic (Valentine 1996) but there is little guidance in the extant literature regarding projective technique analysis and this remains under-researched. (Boddy 2005; Ramsay et al. 2006; Valentine 1996). This paper shares view that projective techniques in qualitative research are distant from psychoanalytical practice and the analytical process is more pragmatic and pedestrian (Boddy 2005:241). With this in
mind this paper proposes a formalised systematic process that can guide researchers through projective technique analysis. The paper critically reviews the methodological approach adopted by the researcher and despite the challenges of producing a standardised method of interpreting projective expressions, this paper makes a step towards formalising projective technique analysis. The contribution of this paper is to develop a systematic framework for interpreting subjective expressions that can be used not only in political branding research but also more widely in marketing research applications.

Methodology

The intention of this paper was to critically examine the use of projective techniques in political branding research and an interpretive perspective was taken which “is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor’s own perspective”, (Taylor and Bogdan 1984:2). The aim of the research was to understand associations, perceptions and attitudes of the Conservative brand amongst young citizens and projective techniques were incorporated into the focus groups discussions (Bloor et al. 2001; Day 1989; Flick 1998). The intention was to provide a deeper understanding of attitudes, feelings and beliefs that lay beneath the surface of the discussion (Boddy 2005; Hofstede, et al. 2007).

Eight two hour focus group discussions were conducted with a total of forty six young citizens aged 18-24 years from three locations in England (Maidenhead, Nottingham, and Hull). Focus groups were conducted prior the 2010 UK General Election during the period of March 2010 to May 2010 with the final focus group taking place four days before polling day. The discussion topics focused upon awareness and attitudes towards politics and the Conservative Party, David Cameron and political interest. Branding was not mentioned explicitly. This paper adopted four of the five sub-categories; association, construction, expressive and completion outlined by Hofstede et al. (2007). All the sub-categorised projective tools claim to “allow participants to project their subjective or deep-seated beliefs onto other people or objects”, (Hofstede et al. 2007:301). The data from the focus groups was collected through transcripts and the pictures, words and images of the projective techniques used.

This study broadly adopted a thematic two-stage analytical process outlined by Butler-Kisber (2010) as a broad systematic framework for interpreting the subjective expressions projected by young participants regarding the political brand image of the UK Conservative Party. The first stage defined as the coarse-grained phase proposed continuous assessing, reassessing the projected expressions, writing memos, formulating some broad categories and cyclically expanding and contrasting the broad categories and emerging themes, (Butler-Kisber 2010). The coarse-grained phase was the starting point, all the projected expressions were categorised into individual-participant projections creating 46 handbooks containing all the projected illustrations expressed by each participant. After reviewing the projected expressions to understand the overall impression (Hofstede et al. 2007), the illustrations were then catalogued to add structure, clarity and ease to the interpretive process. Demographical data provided by each participant was then assessed and their political affiliation catalogued in the individual handbooks. The individual handbooks were then reviewed again and assigned one of four codes; positive, negative, neutral or uncertain to assess the attitudes and feelings that were emerging from the expressions. These codes were not meant to be definitive categories but merely a starting point to analyse the depictions which became apparent from the overall impressions of the projected expressions. This provided a loose framework of the perceptions, associations and attitudes presented by each participant. It was at this stage that a number of common metaphorical themes began to appear (for instance,
wealth depicted as caviar, cigar etc.) and the cataloguing and continuous reviewing revealed key patterns (Noble et al. 2007), expressed both on an individual and collective basis. This supports the notion that there are shared universal concepts, which to a certain extent are collectively agreed but can behold subjective perceptions that differ from citizen to citizen (Goddard 1998).

The second phase of Butler-Kisber’s (2010) two-stage analytical process is defined as the fine-grained phase which required the researcher to look even closer at the expressions, refine the categories and assign and reassign themes, names or codes. This phase involved assessing individual participant’s projected illustrations in the context they were set for example analysing and interpreting all the expressive categorised depictions. It was at the fine-grained phase that greater insight and a more detailed understanding was acquired about the UK Conservative brand image. Broad themes established in the course-grained phase were either strengthened, made redundant or sub-divided providing new areas of thought; new themes; or raised more questions than answers. Accompanying the metaphorical themes, a number of non-standardised unique expressions were presented and each individual theme or illustration was evaluated via one of the four codes identified in the coarse-grained phase; positive, negative, neutral or uncertain. Again these codes were formed from the overall impressions (Hofstede et al. 2007), of the projected expressions.

The fine-grained phase was followed by the production of a discussion document which examined the findings uncovered from the interpretation process of each sub-divided projective technique. A number of participants revealed a number of non-standardised themes that could not be as easily categorised or interpreted as the metaphorical themes that at first appeared meaningless to the researcher and only acquired significance once the practice of cross-checking was employed (Boddy 2005). Cross-checking involved looking at all the projective expressions illustrated by participant, reviewing the demographic data obtained at the beginning of the focus group and analysing the transcripts from the focus groups, where even more data linking to the projective expressions were uncovered. This in turn strengthened the validity of the projective expression analysis and provided further insight which may have been disregarded if cross-checking was not adopted.

This pragmatic process was repeated for each sub-divided projective technique and the analysis and interpretation of each projected expression ceased when categories and themes became saturated (Butler-Kisber 2010). The analytical process followed the systematic framework outlined in figure A. However each categorised projective technique was analysed and interpreted in isolation and minor adaptations depending on the specific nature of the projective technique and the expressions were catalogued and analysed. Once all the projected expressions were analysed and the individual discussions were produced, the catalogues from each sub-divided projective technique were collated into a Metatable enabling further cross-checking highlighting discrepancies or inconsistent expressions. The key themes from the individual discussions were then added to provide an amalgamated data set. The overall impressions formulated at the beginning of the coarse-grained phase were revisited. This was followed by the construction of an overview where the saturated categories were then reassembled into larger more general themes in relation to the aims and objectives of the research. This methodological approach was intended to provide a rigorous process for the analysis and interpretation of projective expressions and the next section will consider the effectiveness of the approach.

Discussion
The aim of this paper was to provide a systematic process for the analysis of projective expressions. This was achieved by adapting the approaches taken by Boddy 2005, Butler-Kisber 2010 and Hofstede et al. 2007 and incorporating their processes into a systematic process. The model (Figure A) illustrates the stages, the phases and the direction taken. It emphasises the importance of the interaction between the course-grained and fine-grained phases with the cross checking phase and the development of the metatable. This was a repetitive and rigorous approach that provided illumination and consistency in the analysis and reporting of the projective expressions. The metatable enabled not only analysis of individual respondents’ projective expressions but also facilitated a comparative analysis across the four different projective techniques. The metatable also allowed a comparison between respondents and other focus groups.

![Figure A: systematic framework for interpretive subjective expressions adapted from Butler-Kisber 2010:30; Boddy 2005; Hofstede 2007)](image)

Nevertheless, despite the projected expressions providing insight into the perception and attitudes towards the Conservative Party a number of limitations became apparent. Cross-checking failed to provide elaboration in all cases and some projected depictions remained un-interpretable raising more questions than answers. A number of ironic or sarcastic depictions were revealed and when cross-checked it was difficult to clarify the point made which raised further questions. The metatable also failed to provide elaboration in all cases however it did highlight inconsistencies between individual participants’ projected illustrations. Of course, there was also the possibility of bias as some participants may deliberately producing projective expressions that were inconsistent with their attitudes and several participants intentionally left a blank page which they said was to express a specific point. However, it is unknown if all the blank pages were intended to convey a particular attitude or respondents just didn’t know what to write.

**Conclusion**

This research critically examined the use of projective techniques in political brand image research and provided insight into the broad systematic framework adopted in analysing and interpreting the projective expressions. From this research it evident that projective techniques can provide insight into underlying feelings and deep-seated attitudes towards political parties, candidates and the positive and negative aspects of brand image. This research provides a pragmatic, systematic framework for the analysis and interpretation of projected expressions from a qualitative perspective in the context of political branding. Furthermore this paper adds to the under-researched and undefined practice of analysing and interpreting projective techniques. Hence, this paper answers not only the call for a rigorous...
approach to projective technique analysis but also the call for a greater understanding of the general adoption of projective techniques in academic and marketing research.

References

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