



Grounding **Qualitative Research** in Cognitive Theory

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different



For decades quantitative researchers have published studies that identify the cognitive steps that consumers take when making purchase decisions (e.g., Cohen and Kunal (1987); Sirsi, Ward and Reingen (1996)). It is not as widespread, however, to hear about a cognitive approach being used by qualitative researchers. And why not—especially given that it's essential for qualitative researchers to understand attitudes, motivators and behaviors that drive brand, product selection and loyalty? Whether exploring consumers' brand perceptions or actual buying intent, constructing qualitative research studies so they tap into consumers' actual cognitive processes simply makes sense.

While some consumer decisions are based on price or functionality, many others are based on deep-seated factors, such as brand perception and value. Understanding what creates those untold consumer/brand emotional bonds are the valuable consumer insights that provide the strongest rationale behind brand selection. This is the power of effective qualitative research.

However, for most people, getting to this deep, emotional place is difficult. It's not that individuals don't want to express themselves or be dishonest; it's that often times they don't know how to unlock this part of their psyche or don't understand the reasons behind their own behavior. While they might attempt to give a rational explanation for a certain behavior or opinion, people in general are not good at analyzing their own motivations and the basis for their actions. Therefore, asking them direct questions often results in surface answers that don't reveal anything of real significance. To understand what ultimately drives someone's behavior, it is important to have a qualitative strategy to get past their outer shell.

Using Cognitive Theory to inform the qualitative approach is one such strategy, and the one we employ here at iModerate. Tying our research to aspects of Cognitive Theory gives us a better understanding of how people think. By incorporating those learnings into our process, we are able to ask questions that make it easier for respondents to articulate the emotional nuances that motivate them. In much the same way a Therapist is armed with the cognitive keys to unlock their patients subconscious, we as qualitative researchers are able to use Cognitive Theory to go to a deeper place with consumers.

The range of questions that can be addressed through Cognitive Theory spans the universe. However, not all cognitive theories address the needs of marketing researchers. At iModerate, we took a long look at the work we do, the environment which we do it, and the research questions we answer, and found that Perception theory, Identity theory and Phenomenology were best suited to be the framework that supports our one-on-one online qualitative research approach.

Perception Theory – Perception theory looks at how the human brain perceives the world. Simply put, at any given time every individual naturally goes through 4 steps to process information – they notice, categorize, group and infer. Asking consumers questions that relate to those steps and following them along that path is a more organic way to obtain their candid thoughts and feelings. Using Perception Theory allows us to cut through the easy platitudes (“It’s nice. I like it...”) and tap into people’s deeper, sometimes unconscious thoughts.

Identity Theory – Identity Theory looks at how people define who they are and where they belong in the world. By making a point to understand how consumers see themselves and who they aspire to be, we can more easily understand what is relevant to them and the choices they make. For instance, if we know that a consumer sees themselves as a young professional fashionista, we can get a better sense as to why or why not they gravitate toward certain brands and messages.

Phenomenology – Phenomenology is the study of consumer experiences from their point of view. When we apply Phenomenology, we ground ourselves in what we believe to be an immovable truth: Consumers interpret the value of a brand (or message) within the context of their own experiences. Using Phenomenology lets a consumer paint their own picture, and allows us understand and isolate which experiences most accurately inform how they connect to a brand.

engaging



From the conceptualization of research design through the analysis and interpretation of research findings, Cognitive Theory allows researchers to create a frame of reference that makes a conversation easier, more natural and more relevant to the participant.

But applying Cognitive Theory to qualitative research doesn't just make it easier for respondents to give honest feedback. Questions based on cognitive theory elicit responses that are more specific, more relevant and more nuanced than responses gathered through direct questioning and other, less strategic qualitative research techniques.

The result is a conversation rife with denser, more vivid information about consumers, which allows marketers to better craft messages, create products or tweak packaging designs in ways that resonate best with consumers

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Cohen, Joel B. and Kunal Basu (1987), "Alternative Models of Categorization: Toward a Contingent Processing Framework," *Journal of Consumer Research*, (13) March 1987.
Sirsi, Ajay K., James C. Ward and Peter H. Reingen (1996), "Microcultural Analysis of Variation in Sharing of Causal Reasoning about Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research*, (22) March 1996.