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EFFECTS OF OBTRUSIVE VIDEOTAPING AND PRICE OF TEST PRODUCT ON FOCUS GROUP ATTITUDES: AN OBJECTIVE SELF-AWARENESS THEORY PERSPECTIVE¹

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ABSTRACT

From an Objective Self-Awareness theory perspective, it was hypothesized that obtrusive videotaping of focus group sessions would lead to more extreme or polarized cognitive responses and attitudes. Subjects were either obtrusively videotaped or not while discussing a new product which was to be introduced either at a high price (counterargumentation cognitive response set) or at a low price (proargumentation cognitive response set). Contrary to the hypothesis, obtrusive videotaping actually increased neutral cognitive response generation. In addition, a two-way interaction on purchase intention showed that the obtrusiveness of the observation had virtually no effect on subjects in the low price condition; but for subjects in the high price condition, obtrusive observation led to increased purchase intention scores. The results were discussed in terms of a modified version of Objective Self-Awareness Theory.

Introduction

Market researchers and consumer psychologists often make use of focus groups to gain some initial, exploratory insights into consumer attitudes toward new products, socio-political issues, labor-management difficulties, and a variety of other problem areas. Parasuraman (1986, p. 243) reported that 95% of the largest consumer products companies in the United States use focus groups as part of their total market research program.

In consumer market research contexts, a focus group is usually a small group of individuals recruited from the target population. The focus group is presented with a problem topic and asked to freely discuss this topic. Typically, there is very little structure to the focus group session. The individuals are simply encouraged to say what they want and to not personally

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attack others. The general idea is that people in a focus group should feel comfortable in saying what they feel and believe about the topic without fear of attack. The relative lack of structure makes for some problems in generalizing the data gathered from focus groups, but the purpose of focus group research is to gain insight and fresh ideas about products and topics that might otherwise be obscured by more traditional, structured questioning techniques (Nelson & Frontczak 1988).

The focus group's behavior and responses can be recorded by human observer(s), by videotape equipment, or by both. However, the present study was concerned mostly with the relative obtrusiveness of the method used to observe the focus group's behavior. Sometimes the human or mechanical observers are right out in the open for all in the focus group to see, and sometimes the observers are out of sight. Even when the observers are out of sight, the focus group participants have typically been forewarned that their behaviors are to be recorded.

Very little, if any, empirical research has been done on the differential impact of using obtrusive versus unobtrusive observation on the subsequent attitudes and behavior of focus groups. This lack of empirical attention comes as a surprise given the popularity of focus group research in marketing and consumer psychology. Moreover, there exists sufficient theoretical and empirical justification from related areas in social psychology for suspecting that focus group data will be affected by the relative obtrusiveness of the observation method.

In addressing the differential impact of obtrusive versus unobtrusive observation on focus group behavior, the present study takes on a social psychological perspective adapted from objective self-awareness theory (Carver & Scheier 1981). Objective self-awareness is presumed to occur when one's attention is directed toward her/himself. Objective self-awareness can be induced by looking at oneself in a mirror or by realizing that one's behavior is being filmed. Objective self-awareness, then, may increase the saliency of one's internal feelings and belief systems. Consistent with this notion are the findings in social psychology which have shown that objective self-awareness can increase the intensity of moods, attitudes, and cognitive responses (see Carver & Scheier 1981 for an excellent review of this literature). Objective self-awareness experiments have not, however, been conducted on focus groups, but from an objective self-awareness perspective it was hypothesized that obtrusive observation (via videotaping) of a focus group will lead to more polarized attitudes and cognitive responses relative to unobtrusive observation (no videotaping).

In the present study, focus groups discussed a new product which was priced either relatively high or relatively low. This price manipulation was intended to produce a biased cognitive response set in the subjects (Lammers 1982). That is, subjects in the high price condition were expected to counterargue more, but proargue less, than subjects in the low price condition. In keeping with the Objective Self-Awareness hypothesis outlined above, it was predicted that this cognitive response bias should be even greater under high objective self-awareness, relative to low objective self-awareness (Hutton & Baumeister 1992).

METHOD

Research Design and Subjects

The experimental design was a 2 x 2 completely randomized factorial with Obtrusiveness (Camera versus No Camera) and Price (High versus Low) as the between-subjects factors. The subjects ($n = 49$) were randomly assigned to the four focus groups conditions. Focus group sizes ranged from 10 to 15. The subjects were business undergraduates at a large state university in southern California who volunteered to participate in the focus group sessions to "gain first-hand

experience in what goes on in focus groups." This cover story was not entirely deceptive since experiential teaching techniques are commonplace in many business classes. All subjects were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and that their grades would in no way be affected by their decision to either participate or not participate in the focus group. Likewise, they were told that they may get up and leave at any time without fear of any form of retribution.

Procedure

Each focus group was instructed to spend about 20 minutes discussing a new product which they were told would be introduced either at a fairly low price of \$14.99 or at a relatively high price of \$19.99. Each focus group session was either obviously being videotaped (Camera condition) or not (No Camera condition). The new product which was to be the topic of discussion by the focus groups was an authentic test product under development by a subsidiary of Warner Communications. The unbranded product was basically a compact, audio-visual laser disc which would display rather elegant graphics on one's television/monitor while playing very high quality sound recordings over a standard stereo system. The product itself was not available to the public at the time of the experiment. The suggested price of \$14.99 was the going rate for the readily available audio-only laser discs at the time of the experiment. The suggested price of \$19.99 was selected as the "high" price primarily at the suggestion of Warner Communications representatives who had reason to believe that their primary target audience (18-24 year olds) was price sensitive and would perceive anything over \$19.99 as unrealistically high. Thus, the \$19.99 price rather than a higher price was selected to enhance the external validity of the experiment.

Each focus group was moderated by a female representative of Warner Communications and attended by two marketing undergraduate males. One of the attendants acted as the cameraman for those groups which were to be videotaped. Otherwise, both attendants merely helped the moderator demonstrate the audio-visual laser disc system and helped her administer questionnaires.

Dependent Measures and Manipulation Checks

After discussing the product, each member of the focus group was asked to fill out a questionnaire containing the primary dependent measures of cognitive responses, attitudes toward the product, purchase intention, manipulation checks on self-awareness and cognitive response set, and some ancillary items dealing with experimental anxiety and the suggested "fair price" of the stimulus product. All subjects were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Cognitive responses. Subjects were given one minute to list all their thoughts, ideas, and feelings about the product they had just discussed. These thoughts were later classified as proarguments (thoughts which were favorable toward the product), counterarguments (thoughts which were unfavorable toward the product, and neutral-irrelevant arguments (thoughts which were neither favorable nor unfavorable toward the product). The female moderator and her two male attendants served as the judges who later classified the thoughts into the three cognitive response categories. The judges were blind as to experimental conditions from which each cognitive response listing originated. This thought-listing procedure is similar to that employed in cognitive response research (Lammers, 1985).

Attitude toward the product and purchase intention. Overall attitude toward the product was assessed by having subjects rate on 11-point, bipolar rating scales how *BAD* (-5) to *GOOD* (+5) they felt the product was. Purchase intention was assessed by having subjects rated the likelihood that they would purchase this product should it become available in the very near future "0%" (-5) to "100%" (+5).

Ancillary Measures

Nervousness of the subject and of the moderator. Subjects were also asked to rate on 11-point, bipolar rating scales how nervous they felt and how nervous they thought the moderator was during the experiment.

Perceived "Fair Price" of Product. Subjects were asked to indicate on an open-ended question what they thought would be a "fair price" for the product they had just seen.

RESULTS

The dependent measures and the manipulation checks were analyzed by univariate 2 x 2 between-subjects Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs), with Obtrusiveness (Camera vs. No Camera) and Price (High vs. Low) as the between-subjects variables. Post hoc examination of any significant interaction effects were done with Duncan's Multiple Range Test.

Manipulation Check on Self-Awareness

The manipulation of self-awareness appeared to have been successful. On 11-point, bipolar rating scales (where -5 = *Not at all self-conscious* and +5 = *Extremely self-conscious*), subjects in the Obtrusive videotaping conditions rated themselves as having been more self-conscious than did subjects in the Nonobtrusive conditions, $\bar{M}_{\text{Camera}} = -2.296$ vs. $\bar{M}_{\text{No Camera}} = -3.864$, $F(1,45) = 6.33$, $p = .016$. No other significant effects were found on ratings of self-consciousness.

Cognitive Responses

The ANOVAs on the cognitive responses generated by the subjects produced only two significant effects: a Price main effect on counterarguing, which actually represents a manipulation check on cognitive response set, and a Camera main effect on neutral arguing.

Manipulation check on cognitive response set. As anticipated, subjects in the high price condition generated more counterarguments than did subjects in the low price condition, $\bar{M}_{\text{High Price}} = .500$ vs. $\bar{M}_{\text{Low Price}} = .160$, $F(1,45) = 4.371$, $p = .042$. Since cognitive responses have generally been found to be precursors of attitudes, it was felt that the price manipulation effectively created the relatively high and low counterarguing cognitive response sets necessary to affect attitude.

Effect of obtrusive observation on cognitive responses. A Camera main effect on the total number of neutral cognitive responses generated showed that subjects generated more neutral cognitive responses under the obtrusive camera condition than under the no camera condition, $\bar{M}_{\text{Camera}} = .227$ vs. $\bar{M}_{\text{No Camera}} = 0.0$, $F(1,45) = 7.805$, $p = .008$. No other effects on cognitive responses were found to be significant.

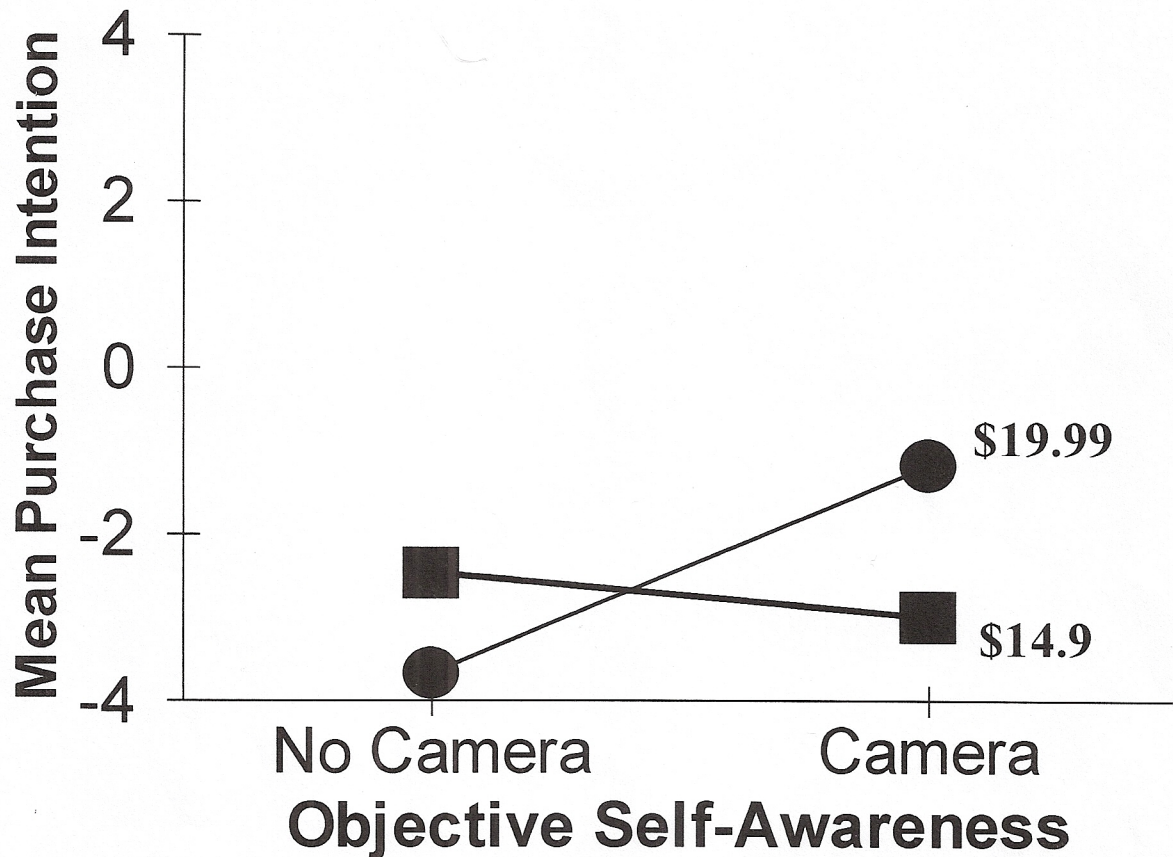
Attitude toward the Product

Subjects were asked to give their overall evaluation of the product on an 11-point, bipolar rating scale. No significant effects were found on attitude toward the product, Grand $\bar{M} = +1.347$. No significant effects were found on the absolute value of attitude scores, Grand $\bar{M} = 2.286$. Thus, there was no evidence of either attitude change nor of attitude polarization as a function of Obtrusiveness and/or Price.

Purchase Intention

A significant Price x Camera interaction on purchase intention, $F(1, 45) = 4.566$, $p = .038$. The means for this interaction are shown below in Figure 1.

Fig 1: Objective Self-Awareness X Price Interaction on Mean Purchase Intention



Internal comparisons of the means for this interaction showed that the obtrusiveness of observation had virtually no effect on the purchase intentions of subjects in the low price condition, $\bar{M}_{\text{No Camera}} = -2.467$ vs. $\bar{M}_{\text{Camera}} = -3.000$, $p > .05$. For subjects in the high price condition, however, increasing the obtrusiveness of observation led to an increase in purchase intention, $\bar{M}_{\text{No Camera}} = -3.667$ vs. $\bar{M}_{\text{Camera}} = -1.167$, $p < .05$.

Effects on Ancillary Measures

Self-ratings of nervousness. No significant effects were found on subjects' self-ratings of how nervous they were during the experiment, Grand $\bar{M} = +3.755$.

Moderator nervousness ratings. No significant effects were found on subjects' rating of how nervous they felt the moderator was during the experiment.

Fair price estimates. An open-ended question asked the subjects to indicate what they felt would be a "fair price" for the new product they had just seen. No significant effects on this variable were found, Grand $\bar{M} = \$16.95$.

DISCUSSION

It had been hypothesized from Objective Self-Awareness Theory that obtrusive observation of focus groups would affect the cognitive responses and attitudes of those groups in such a way that the cognitive responses and attitudes would be more extreme or polarized. No support for a polarization effect was found in the present study. In fact, obtrusive observation (Camera condition), relative to less obtrusive observation (No Camera condition), actually increased the generation of neutral cognitive responses by the subjects but had no effect on the generation of the more polarized counterarguing and proarguing responses.

A modification of Objective Self-Awareness Theory may be sufficient to account for the findings. Perhaps the manipulation of objective self-awareness in the present study increased subjects' concerns about their public self-presentation and image. That is, perhaps subjects in obtrusive observation conditions, relative to those in the less obtrusive conditions, were more concerned about appearing objective and less biased in their evaluations. This concern for self-presentation may have resulted in the propensity to generate neutral cognitive responses at the expense of counterarguments and proarguments. So instead of polarizing cognitive responses and attitudes, objective self-awareness may neutralize such variables.

The most challenging finding of the present study was the Camera \times Price interaction on purchase intention (see Figure 1). This interaction showed that the obtrusiveness of the observation affected only the subjects who were in the high price condition. More specifically, subjects in the high price condition gave higher purchase intention scores than did subjects in the low price condition.

High price is normally considered to be an instigator of counterarguing, as was shown even in the present study. However, high price also tends to increase the perceived quality of a product. A possible explanation for the observed interaction in the present study is that subjects in the camera condition were distracted by the obtrusiveness of the observation. This relative distraction may have forced them to rely more on other situational or peripheral cues and less on their own internal cognitive responses. Price, then, may have become a more salient cue under high obtrusive observation conditions. High price may have increased the purchase intention under obtrusive observation because of the greater importance subjects may have given to price under the distracting situation of obtrusive observation. This possibility becomes even more palatable when one considers that the high price used in the present study was still within the perceived acceptable price range as defined by the Warner Communications representatives. Had the high price been outside of the "latitude of acceptance" the opposite result may well have been observed.

Overall, the findings of the present study show that obtrusive observation on focus groups is considerably more complicated than originally hypothesized from Objective Self-Awareness Theory. At this point, though, it appears that a modified version of Objective Self-Awareness Theory may still be able to account for the effects. Consequently, the usual call for more research is invoked by the present study. Future research may investigate the effects of self-focused attention on a wide variety of consumer responses ranging from customer satisfaction surveys to consumer tipping behavior. Ultimately, more research will clarify the effects of obtrusive measurement on consumer responses.

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✓ Alternative explanation

Obtrusive observation led participants to give more “socially acceptable” responses. We often hear that you “get what you pay for,” so the higher price may have been perceived as a socially visible cue for higher quality, rather than as a point of contention for internal counterarguing.

Thus, the obtrusive observation may have led to more awareness of personal concerns and attitudes toward “fitting in” than to more awareness of personal attitudes toward some low involving product.

To obtain the original hypothesized effect, may need a high involving product.