FOCUS GROUP: A PRACTICAL APPLICATION IN CLASSROOM

O. Martins¹, A. Coelho², J. Costa³, T. Felgueira⁴, A. Braga⁴

¹Polytechnic Institute of Tomar, CIAEGT-IPT & Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (PORTUGAL)
²Aveiro Institute of Accounting and Administration, University of Aveiro (ISCA-UA) and
GOVCOPP Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public (PORTUGAL)
³Higher Institute of Fafe & Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (PORTUGAL)
⁴Polytechnic Institute of Guarda UDI-IPG (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

The consumer behaviour is a complex field of investigation and an expensive type of research that requires a relative investment of resources and time. Besides, the consumer is increasingly informed and demanding. Changing of the market can influence the consumer behaviour, and vice-versa. So, the integrative process of training and forming people to study the human behaviour is a very complicated process. Teaching the theory is a relatively easy task but it is not enough. Students are able to understand the concept and the theory, and of course, to develop a unique reflection, but they have difficulty to apply the same content to a practical situation on the real context. To respond to this problem, the following general objective was defined: to apply the focus group’s technique with marketing master students. The principal objective was divided into two parts: i) the application of the focus group interview itself; and ii) the qualitative analysis of the data. A content analysis was the technique chosen to data analysis. Whereas the individual results are hard to measure, but it is not impossible to do, the main results are: i) the collaborative teamwork; ii) the practice of the methodology through a practical application of the technique, and iii) a few skills were developed, which it needed to be developed to create a collaborative teamwork, and the student motivations, able to participate in the discussion, were the most important results of the activity. The learning itself can be considered as an asset.

Keywords: Focus Group; Content analysis; Behaviour Consumer; Teaching Methodology.

1 INTRODUCTION

The consumer behaviour is a complex field of investigation. It is also a very expensive research, that it requires an investment of resources and time [1]. The consumer is increasingly informed and demanding. Changes in the market alter consumer behaviour, and vice versa.

Teaching the theory is a relatively easy task. There are countless books that explain the phenomena. Nevertheless, it is very common to identify an enormous difficulty to apply in practice, the same “formula” that you learned in books and classrooms.

Students can understand the concept and develop a reflection, but they cannot easily apply the same content to a practical situation. This is due to various factors, like having a little professional experience, to factors that it involves the dynamics of the context of the problems. This phenomenon is aggravated in terms of research methodologies, namely qualitative research approach, in function of to the subjectivity and complexity of the investigation itself.

Following general objective to apply the focus group’s technique with marketing master students. The technique is chosen because it is widely used in marketing, particularly in the consumer behavior field [2].

To achieve the main objective, the focus group was implemented during approximately one hour and half. Seven students and one moderate were the participants of focus group. And the main result was learning by doing.

2 METHODOLOGY

In 1996, Morgan defined a focus group as a data collection technique that uses group interaction to discuss a specific topic. It can be used at different times in the same research, alone or integrated with other research methods [3].
The use of the focus group technique is particularly useful when we want a contextual understanding of a problem [4] in which the resulting information is qualitative, not with the purpose of extrapolation to a wider population.

Sometimes, this technique also can be used in the development of a survey instrument in a sequential phase mixed-methods, that use an exploratory qualitative method to enhance the quantitative phase. Galliott and Graham showed how the results of an initial exploratory phase was important to the development of a questionnaire to be used in the main phase of the research [5].

“Focus group discussion is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population” [6].

As referred by Silva et al., besides the different levels of use and reflection, the adoption of the focus group technique has been observed in a diversified range of areas, such as health education and intervention, understanding of management and organizational practices, education environment or consumer behavior [3].

Focus group is useful methodology to explore the phenomenon. The expected time recommended for in-depth interview is around 1-3 hours. Usually, the focus group is a small and homogenous group of 4–6 participants [7]. Other authors defended groups of 8-12 individuals, and one moderator [8].

The focus group or focus groups are semi-structured interviews with small groups, where the moderator interviews a group of participants and uses the group process to stimulate discussion and obtain information about participants' perceptions, attitudes or motivations in a specific topic [9].

The group should be free to express their thoughts and ideas [10]. The moderator should have a guide and making open questions to encourage individuals to talk [11].

To respond to this problem, the student difficulties to apply the same content to a practical situation, the following general objective was defined: to apply the focus group's technique with marketing master students. This objective was divided into two parts: i) the application of the focus group interview itself; and ii) the qualitative analysis of the data.

The application of the focus group interview was relatively easy to develop. The teacher was the moderator of the trial. For this purpose, a guiding script was developed early, based on variables and indicators to explore factors of influence. The concepts of these variables and indicators were founded on the Theory of Reasoned Action [TRA], of Fishbein and Ajzen, in 1975 [12].

There was a discussion on the theme focus group, after the interview. Positive and negative events were reported. And the students were able to express themselves. Above all, they raised their doubts regarding the development of the activity.

On the second part, a qualitative analysis was developed. The content analysis was the technique chosen to data analysis. The practical application was recorded in audio and it was transcribed [13]. On average, each student had ten minutes of interview to make the transcription, as well as to identify the categories in the text, according they were defined in the classroom.

The data analysis was more complicated, especially with regard to the subjective part of the analysis. The students should categorize the data [14]. The greatest impasse was to define these categories and dimensions. The line is not clear. Many doubts coexisted when the objective was to categorize and fit its dimension.

The focus group technique was chosen because it is widely used in marketing, particularly in the consumer behavior field. Encouraging the articulated interpretation, the focus group technique offers an opportunity to observe the discussion [15]. Although many articles refer to how it is done, the practical analysis had many doubts, and the discussion was a constant of learning.

3 RESULTS

The Focus Group is a qualitative research methodology highly recommended to explore, describe and identifying meaning of individual experiences [16]. In this sense, the focus group is a useful technique that it can be used to explore aspects of consumer behavior influence.
Exploring factors, the technique is very useful in research on consumer behavior issues because the consumer is increasingly informed and demanding. Changes in the market alter consumer behavior, and vice versa.

One of the most important assumptions of the technique is having a homogeneous group. For this work, the individuals were comfortable expressing their opinions. The group was comfortable and managed to expose the different perspectives of the same phenomenon.

In the discussion, the group worked together. The best part of class was seeing them in a discussion where they complemented each other. They were very polite, in order to allow everyone’s participation.

Seven respondents and one moderator were talking openly about the main influencing factors for testing a new food product for approximately one and a half hours. The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed by the participants.

The main advantages of the technique are associated with the identification of factors of influence (variables and indicators) as well as the exploration of how these factors influence each other.

To be as assertive as possible in terms of focus group, the research identified the main conceptual dimensions of these variables (individual beliefs and social beliefs), as well as the dimensions of the decision (by rational factors, emotional factors or factors concern the perception of risk/control).

In spite of the group discussion, the work reflected the differences in thoughts and ideas. The proposal was identical, but the final paper works were differentiated between them. The main results of the research were the variables, but the principal result was learning the practice of the methodology itself. The teamwork in a collaborative research was an added value. Actually, it could be called as an asset.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main objective of this study is applying the focus group’s technique with marketing master students. The objective aims to teach the theory of the technique in practice. Using a previous developed guide, the professor was the moderator of a small group of seven students. The discussion spent one hour and half. The in-depth interview was recorded, transcribed and analysed as a learning experience.

The first result to reflect on is the learning itself. Experimenting with the technique in practice raised questions that were previously unknown. Besides, the acquired know-how was different for each one. But together, all different point of views can add value.

The second relevant factor was the motivation of the students, to learn and to discover new factors of influence. Identifying and categorizing the variables, individual and social beliefs, has created a great deal of discussion. While teaching the theory could been considered “boring”, the focus group activity was exciting, and it involved every member of the group.

Lastly, the developed skills have an immeasurable value. Communication, leadership, teamwork, participation and integration were some of the skills developed from this work. The values developed were incalculable.

All the integrative process of training and forming people is very complicated. And the individual results are hard to measure, but it is not impossible to do. The practical application of the technique, the main developed skills, which it needed to be developed to create a collaborative teamwork, and the student motivations, able to participate in the discussion, were the most important results of the activity.

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REFERENCES


