

**Marketing Research – Lecture 10**

LESSON 10

**Observation**

**Learning Objective 10.1 – Observation in Marketing Research**

Observation in marketing research is the systematic recording of behavioral patterns of people, objects, and events as they occur. No inquiry or communication with other individuals is required. Researchers who collect data using the observation method either observe and record data while observing events or use a monitoring system such as checkout scanners or Internet activity logs.

**What Can Be Observed?**

Observational studies collect a vast array of behavioral information. Observation can be used to describe a broad range of behavior, but cognitive phenomena such as attitudes, motivations, and preferences cannot be observed. Consequently, observational research cannot explain why a behavior occurred or what the intended actions were. Another limitation is the typically brief duration of observation. Observing behavior patterns that occur over a period of several days or weeks is typically impractical or prohibitively expensive.

**The Nature of Observation Studies**

Using human observers or machines designed for specific observation duties, marketing researchers can observe individuals, objects, events, and other phenomena. Human observation is ideal for situations or behaviors that are difficult to predict in advance. Mechanical observation, such as that performed by supermarket scanners or traffic counters, can accurately record routine, repetitive, or programmed situations or patterns of behavior. Generally, human or mechanical observation is unobtrusive, meaning there is no communication with a respondent. As an alternative to asking customers how long they spend shopping in the store, a supermarket management may observe and record the intervals between when customers enter and exit the store. The unobtrusive or nonreactive nature of the observation method frequently generates data without the knowledge of the subject. Visible observation occurs in situations

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where the subject is aware of the presence of an observer. Hidden observation occurs when a subject is ignorant that he or she is being observed. Hidden, unobtrusive observation minimizes respondent error. When participants are oblivious that they are being observed, it is not necessary to solicit their participation. The primary advantage of observation studies over surveys that collect self-reported data from respondents is that the data are free of distortions, inaccuracies, and other response biases due to memory error, social desirability bias, etc. The data are collected when the actual behavior occurs.

#### **Learning Objective 10.2 – Observation of Human Behavior**

Unlike surveys, observation studies place an emphasis on and permit the systematic recording of nonverbal behavior. Toy manufacturers, such as Fisher Price, employ the observation method because children frequently cannot articulate their reactions to their products. By observing how children interact with a proposed toy, puppet, or game, marketing researchers may be able to identify the characteristics of a potentially successful product.

Behavioral scientists have acknowledged that nonverbal behavior can be a form of communication through which individuals exchange meanings. As communication symbols, head motions, smiles, raised eyebrows, and other facial expressions and body movements have been identified. Observing nonverbal communication may contain great potential for marketing researchers. An example of a hypothesis regarding interactions between customers and salespeople is that the salesperson would signal status based on the significance of each transaction. In low-importance transactions, where potential customers are abundant and easily replaced (for example, in a shoe store), the salesperson may exhibit distinct nonverbal signals of higher status than the customer. When customers are limited, such as in high-priced purchase situations (real estate sales), the salesperson should demonstrate many nonverbal cues of deference.

#### **Complementary Evidence**

The results of observational studies may complement the findings of other types of research by providing evidence of individuals' "true" emotions. Focus group interviews are frequently conducted behind one-

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way mirrors, from which marketing executives can observe and listen in. This additional source permits the interpretation of nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions and head movements, as a supplement to information gathered through interviews. In one focus group session regarding women's use of hand lotion, for instance, researchers observed that all of the women's hands were leisurely resting on the table as they waited for the session to begin. As soon as the women were informed that the topic would be hand lotion, they were instructed to hide their hands. Along with the group discussion, this observation disclosed the women's anger, guilt, and shame regarding the condition of their hands. Although they believed they were expected to have soft, attractive hands, their housework required them to wash dishes, scrub floors, and perform other physically demanding tasks. Observing nonverbal communication symbols can enhance marketers' understanding of a situation when focus group behavior is captured on video.

#### **Direct Observation**

Detailed accounts of what people actually do during an event can be produced through direct observation. The observer plays a passive role, making no effort to control or manipulate a situation; instead, he or she solely documents what transpires. Many categories of information can be gathered with greater precision through direct observation than through questioning. Recording traffic statistics or observing the direction of traffic flows within a supermarket, for instance, can assist managers in designing store layouts that maximize the visibility of impulse-buying departments. A manufacturer is able to determine the number of facings, shelf locations, display maintenance, and other elements that enhance store conditions. Most shoppers would be unable to accurately report the amount of time they spend in each department if asked directly in a survey. In contrast, the observation method could ascertain this without difficulty.

Using direct observation, the data consists of real-time observations of incidents. Observation forms assist researchers in maintaining consistency and ensuring that all pertinent information is recorded. A respondent is not required to recall — possibly inaccurately — an event that occurred in the past; rather, the observation is immediate.

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In a survey measuring quality of life, researchers asked respondents a succession of questions that were compiled into an index of happiness. However, direct observation was also used because the researchers intended to examine the impact of weather conditions on people's responses. The researchers observed and recorded the outside temperature and humidity on the day of the interviews, as well as the temperature and humidity inside the building where the interviews were conducted, with relative ease.

Recording the decision time required to choose between two alternatives is a basic, unobtrusive task that can be accomplished through direct observation with relative ease. Response latency refers to the choice time documented as a measure of the intensity of the preference between alternatives. This measure is based on the hypothesis that the closer two alternatives are in terms of preference, the longer it takes a decision maker to choose between them. In contrast, making a hasty decision is likely indicative of a large psychological distance between alternatives, i.e., the apparent choice. Since a computer can record decision times, response latency is gaining popularity as computer-assisted data collection methods become more prevalent.

#### **Errors Associated with Direct Observation**

Although direct observation does not require interaction with the subject, it is not error-free; the observer may subjectively record events. The same visual cues that may influence the interaction between interviewer and respondent (e.g., the subject's age or sex) may also play a role in certain direct observation contexts, such as when the observer subjectively attributes a certain economic status or educational background to a subject. Observer bias is a distortion of measurement caused by the cognitive behavior or actions of the witnessing observer. During the observation process, fieldworkers may be required to rely on their own interpretations of people or situations, as in the case of a research project that uses observers to evaluate whether sales clerks are impolite or courteous.

#### **Scientifically Contrived Observation**

In order to verify a hypothesis, an investigator will occasionally intervene and create an artificial environment. This method is known as contrived observation. Certain behavior patterns, such as

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employee responses to complaints, are more likely to occur when influenced by artificial observation. A passenger who complains about a meal or flight attendant service may actually be a researcher observing that person's reactions. If situations were not fabricated, the amount of time researchers spend waiting and observing would increase significantly. A number of retailers employ mystery consumers to visit their stores and act as if they are interested in a specific product or service. After exiting the store, the "shopper" evaluates the performance of the salesperson.

#### **Combining Direct**

##### **Observation and Interviewing**

Some research investigations combine visible observation and interviews with participants. Individuals are requested to explain their actions during or after in-depth observations. Direct observation of women applying hand and body lotion revealed, for instance, two distinct types of consumers. Some women vigorously rubbed the lotion into their skin after applying it. Others massaged their epidermis while applying lotion. When the women were questioned about their behavior, the researchers discovered that the moisturizer was being used as a treatment for dry skin by the women who applied it. Those who caressed their skin were primarily concerned with making it scent pleasant and feel smooth.

##### **Ethical Issues in the Observation of Humans**

Observation techniques raise a number of ethical concerns. The issue of a respondent's right to privacy is raised by covert observation. Suppose a company approaches a research firm seeking information on how women put on their undergarments by observing their behavior in a spa dressing room. The researcher contemplates approaching spas in several major cities in order to discreetly witness women getting dressed. Clearly, this situation poses ethical concerns. Women do not expect their dressing behavior to be recorded, despite the fact that the dressing room is often a place where they dress in public view.

This observational approach is therefore unethical unless a method is found for some women to consent to such observation. Some individuals may view artificial observation as entrapment. To entrap is to deceive or mislead into difficulty, which is unquestionably an abusive act. The issue involves harmonizing values. If the researcher is granted permission to observe a subject, the subject may not behave naturally. Therefore, there is sometimes a strong temptation to observe without permission. In other situations,

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such as mall traffic monitoring, it would be difficult to obtain consent to observe individuals walking through the mall.

#### **Learning Objective 10.3 – Observation of Physical Objects**

Observational studies of physical phenomena are possible. Physical-trace evidence is a visible indication of a past occurrence or event. For instance, the deterioration on library books indicates inferentially which books are actually read (handled the most) when they are checked out. Erosion on the floor tiles surrounding the hatching-chick exhibit at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry is a classic example of tangible trace evidence in a non-profit setting. These tiles were required to be replaced every six weeks, whereas tiles in other areas of the museum did not require replacement for years. The selective deterioration of tiles, as measured by the replacement rate, was an indicator of the relative popularity of exhibits.

Counting and recording physical inventories via retail or wholesale audits is a second application of observing physical objects. This methodology permits researchers to investigate brand sales on regional and national levels, market shares, seasonal purchasing patterns, etc. Both retail and wholesale audit data are made available by marketing research companies. Using physical-trace data, an observer can discover information that a respondent could not recall precisely. For instance, without relying on the respondent's memory, measuring the number of ounces of liquid bleach used during a test provides precise physical-trace evidence. The reliability of respondents' memories is not a concern for the company conducting the pantry audit. Rather than individual responses, the pantry audit necessitates an inventory of the brands, quantities, and package sizes in a consumer's home. The problem of dishonesty and other forms of response bias are eliminated. For instance, the pantry audit prevents respondents from falsely claiming to have purchased prestigious brands. Permission to physically inspect consumers' pantries is difficult to obtain, and fieldwork is costly. In addition, the brand in the pantry may not correspond to the most frequently purchased brand if consumers substituted it because they had a coupon, the usual brand was unavailable, or for some other reason.

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#### **Learning Objective 10.4 – Content Analysis**

In addition to observing people and physical objects, researchers may employ content analysis, which collects data by observing and analyzing the contents or messages of advertisements, newspaper articles, television programs, and similar materials. This method employs both systematic analysis and observation to determine the specific information content and other characteristics of messages. The design of a systematic observation and recording procedure for quantitative description of the manifest content of communication is required for content analysis. This technique measures the degree to which a specific analytic category is highlighted or omitted. For instance, the content analysis of advertisements may assess their use of words, themes, characters, or space-time relationships. The frequency with which women, African-Americans, or ethnic minorities appear in mass media is another topic of content analysis.

It is possible to use content analysis to investigate questions such as whether some advertisers use certain themes, appeals, claims, or deceptive practices more frequently than others or whether recent consumer-focused actions by the Federal Trade Commission have influenced the content of advertising. To evaluate its competition, a cable television programmer may conduct a content analysis of network programming. Each year, researchers analyze the Super Bowl telecast to determine how much of the visual content is live-action play and how much is replay, as well as how many shots concentrate on cheerleaders versus spectators. Additionally, content analysis can examine the informational content of television commercials aimed at minors, the company images depicted in advertisements, and a variety of other advertising-related aspects.

#### **Learning Objective 10.5 – Mechanical Observation**

In many situations, the primary—and sometimes the only—means of observation is mechanical rather than human. Video cameras, traffic counters, and other machines help observe and record behavior. Some unusual observation studies have used motion-picture cameras and time-lapse photography. An early application of this observation technique photographed train passengers and determined their levels of comfort by observing how they sat and moved in their seats. Another time-lapse study filmed traffic flows in an urban square and resulted in a redesign of the streets. Similar techniques may help

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managers design store layouts and resolve problems in moving people or objects through spaces over time.

#### **Television Monitoring**

ACNielsen's television monitoring system to estimate national television audiences is arguably the most well-known marketing research initiative involving mechanical observation and computerized data collection. Nielsen Media Research obtains national ratings for television programs using a consumer panel and a monitoring device called a PeopleMeter. The Nielsen PeopleMeter collects information on what is playing on each television in a household and who is viewing at the time.

Researchers attach electronic devices to televisions and remote controls to collect data on program selection and viewing duration. Nielsen identifies the programs being viewed by comparing the signals collected by these devices to its database of network broadcast and cable program schedules.

#### **Monitoring Website Traffic**

Computer technology makes it simple and economical to collect detailed data about online behavior. Identifying which measures are meaningful and correctly interpreting the data are the greater obstacles. For instance, the vast majority of organizations track website traffic. They may count the number of hits, or mouse clicks, on a specific website page. If a visitor clicks on multiple links, a page will receive multiple visits. In a similar manner, they can monitor page views or single, discrete clicks to load individual web pages. Page views more conservatively indicate how many users visit each individual page on the website and may also be used to monitor the path or sequence of pages followed by each visitor.

#### **Click-Through Rates**

A click-through rate (CTR) is the proportion of individuals exposed to an advertisement who click on the corresponding link that leads to the business's website. The quantity of interest or focus a website receives can be inferred from the number of visits or page views, but these metrics are flawed. First, visits do not distinguish between high activity by a small number of visitors and low activity by a large number of

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visitors. Moreover, the researcher lacks information regarding the significance of the statistics. If a user repeatedly visits a website, does he or she discover a great deal of useful or entertaining content, or is he or she unsuccessfully trying to locate something by searching in multiple locations? In addition, some hits are presumably made in error. The consumers may not have intended to click on the advertisement or may not have understood what they were doing when they did. Unique visitors to a website constitute a more accurate tally. This metric counts the initial visit to the site, but not subsequent visits by the same user within the same day or week. Website operators can collect data by attaching small files known as cookies to the computers of site visitors and then monitoring the cookies to determine whether the same visitors return.

#### **Scanner-Based Research**

Optical character recognition (OCR) lasers and barcode technology, such as the universal product code (UPC), have accelerated the use of mechanical observation in marketing research.

This technology enables researchers to investigate demographically or promotionally specific queries. Different consumer responses to price promotions and the effects of those responses on a promotion's profitability have been investigated by scanner research. The establishment of a scanner-based consumer panel to replace consumer purchase diaries is one of the most important methods for conducting this form of research. A typical scanner panel assigns each household a barcoded card, similar to a frequent-shopper card, which members present to the cashier. The code number of the residence is linked to the purchase information recorded by the scanner. In addition, as with other consumer panels, the household code number can be paired with background information about the household obtained through responses to a battery of demographic and psychographic survey questions.

Scanner data can demonstrate a marketer, even in a single store, how a product is performing week by week and track sales in response to local advertisements or promotions. In addition, a number of companies, including Information Resources Inc., have developed scanner panels.

Home scanning systems that use portable wands to read UPC symbols have been made possible by advancements in bar-code technology. After receiving the products at home, consumer panelists conduct

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their own scanning. This development enables the investigation of purchases made in retailers without in-store scanning equipment.

#### **Measuring Physiological Reactions**

Researchers in marketing have utilized a variety of other mechanical devices to assess the physical and physiological responses of consumers to advertising copy, packaging, and other stimuli. When researchers believe that consumers are oblivious of their own responses to stimuli such as advertising or that consumers will not provide honest responses, they employ such methods. Physiological reactions are measured using four main categories of mechanical devices: (1) eye-tracking monitors, (2) pupilometers, (3) psychogalvanometers, and (4) voice-pitch analyzers.

The gaze movement of a viewer's eye is measured physiologically using an eye-tracking monitor, which measures unconscious eye movements. Modern eye-tracking systems do not require a viewer's head to remain in a fixed position. These systems were originally devised to measure eye fatigue in astronauts. The devices monitor eye movements by focusing invisible infrared light beams on the eyes of the subject. Light reflects off the eye, and eye-movement data are recorded, while a second miniature video camera monitors which magazine page is being viewed.

A pupilometer monitors and documents changes in the subject's pupil size. A subject is instructed to view a projected advertisement or other stimulus on a screen. When the stimulus's brightness and distance from the subject's eyes are held constant, changes in pupil size may be interpreted as changes in cognitive activity caused by the stimulus, rather than eye dilation and constriction in response to light intensity, distance, or other physiological responses to the conditions of observation. This research methodology is predicated on the premise that increased pupil size is indicative of favorable attitudes toward and interest in advertisements.

A psychogalvanometer measures galvanic skin response (GSR), an involuntary change in the skin's electrical resistance. This device is predicated on the idea that physiological changes, such as increased

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perspiration, accompanied emotional responses to advertisements, packaging, and slogans. Excitation increases the body's perspiration rate, which raises the skin's electrical resistance. This test measures emotional arousal and tension.

Voice-pitch analysis is a relatively novel physiological measurement technique that assesses an individual's emotional responses based on the physiological changes in their voice. Using sophisticated, audio-adapted computer equipment, abnormal vocal frequencies brought on by alterations to the autonomic nervous system are measured. A computerized analysis compares the pitch of the respondent's voice during warm-up conversations (normal range) with his or her verbal responses to queries regarding his or her evaluation of television commercials or other stimuli. Unlike other physiological devices, this technique does not require the researcher to surround subjects with a maze of wires and apparatus.

All of these methods presume that physiological responses are associated with persuasion or that they can predict a cognitive response. This assumption has not yet been demonstrably proven. The argument that such a physiological change is a valid indicator of future sales, attitude change, or emotional response is not supported by strong theoretical evidence. Calibration, or the sensitivity of measuring devices, is a further significant obstacle in physiological research. Identifying arousal is one thing, but quantifying arousal levels is another. Moreover, the majority of these devices are costly. Nonetheless, according to a prominent researcher, physiological measurement is coincidental: "Physiological measurement is not an exit interview. It is not dependent on what was subsequently remembered. It is a real-time, blood, perspiration, and tears response that is synchronized with the stimulus."

Each of these mechanical devices has an additional limitation: subjects are typically placed in artificial environments, such as viewing television in a laboratory rather than at home, and they are aware that they are being observed.

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**Progress Check:**

Requirements:

1. Due Date : \_\_\_\_\_ before 5pm
2. Essay format, minimum of 20 words and maximum of 100 words.

**Questions**

1. **Discuss the role of observation as a marketing research method.**
2. **Describe the use of direct observation and contrived observation**
3. **Identify ethical issues in observation studies.**

**Answer**

1. Observation is a potent instrument for marketing researchers. Scientific observation is the systematic process of recording the observed behavioral patterns of people, objects, and events. There is no questioning or other form of communication with subjects. Observing the behavior of people and objects reveals an abundance of data. Observable phenomena include physical actions, verbal behavior, expressive behavior, spatial relations and locations, temporal patterns, physical objects, and both verbal and visual records. Thus, one can observe both verbal and nonverbal behavior. However, observation cannot be used for cognitive phenomena. Attitudes,

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motivations, expectations, intentions, and preferences cannot be observed; only short-lived, overt behavior is observable.

2. Human observation, whether direct or indirect, is frequently employed when the situation or behavior to be recorded cannot be readily predicted in advance. Many categories of data can be obtained more accurately through direct observation than by questioning respondents, despite the fact that it may be less intrusive. Direct observation entails observing and recording what occurs naturally, without manipulating the environment. Observation is the most direct or only mode of data collection for some types of information. For instance, researchers can measure response latency, which is the time it takes individuals to decide between options. Observer bias may interfere with the correct perception of observed behaviors. Observation is also possible through the creation of situations to be observed. This can reduce the time and cost required to obtain responses to specific situations.
3. Intentional observation, covert observation, and other observational research designs may involve deception. Because of this, these techniques frequently raise ethical concerns regarding the subjects' right to privacy and right to be informed.

#### **Quiz 10**

##### **True or false**

1. Physical-trace evidence serves as an invisible record of past events.
2. Content analysis obtains data by observing and analyzing the contents of the messages in written or spoken communications.
3. Physiological reactions, such as arousal or eye movement patterns, may be observed using a number of mechanical devices.
4. Eye-tracking monitors identify the direction of a person's gaze, and a pupilometer observes and records changes in the diameter of the pupils of subjects' eyes, based on the assumption that a larger pupil signifies a positive attitude.

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5. Voice-pitch analysis measures changes in a person's voice and associates the changes with emotional response.
6. In marketing research, observation is a systematic process of recording behavioral patterns of people, objects, and occurrences as they happen.
7. Human or mechanical observation is generally *obtrusive*, meaning no communication with a respondent takes place.
8. The results of observation studies may amplify the results of other forms of research by providing *complementary evidence* concerning individuals' "true" feelings.
9. Content analysis studies the message itself and involves the design of a systematic observation and recording procedure for quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.
10. A click-through rate (CTR) is the percentage of people who are exposed to an advertisement who actually click on the corresponding hyperlink which takes them to the company's web site.

#### Answer

1. F
2. T
3. T
4. T
5. T
6. T
7. F
8. T
9. T
10. T