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PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES AND USE OF VISUAL IMAGES IN A DIGITAL WORLD

A RESEARCH METHODS REPORT

Prepared By:

Linda Tuncay Zayer Loyola University Chicago

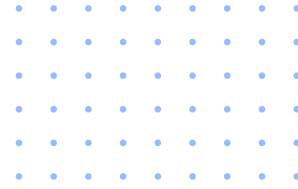
Cristel Antonia Russell Pepperdine University

Jenna Drenten Loyola University Chicago

For questions, please contact Linda Tuncay Zayer at ltuncay@luc.edu

Welcome

About This Report



“Common sense also points to an enduring aspect and appeal of projective techniques: children universally love to play ‘let’s pretend’ and more mature consumers do, too, if only we let them.”

– Rook (2006 p.154)

This report provides an overview of projective techniques and proposes ways to extend their usefulness in a digital age. First, we provide a discussion of the roots and history of these techniques and how they have been used in consumer research in the past. Next, with this foundational understanding, we review best practices for collecting and analyzing data with projective techniques. Finally, we present novel ways that projective techniques and visual images can be used by researchers moving forward.

Of note, this report was specifically prepared for the 2023 Association for Consumer Research Conference. It is a pre-print report of a forthcoming book chapter in the *Handbook on Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing* (2nd edition, Edward Elgar) edited by Cele Otnes and Russell Belk.

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Historical Overview of Projective Techniques



Projective and associated enabling techniques (Boddy 2005) have a long history in consumer research (e.g., Levy 1985). They are used to uncover meanings that are less accessible by more direct measures because they rely on “attributing to others characteristics individuals cannot or will not see in themselves” (McGrath, Sherry, and Levy 1993, 172). These techniques represent a combination of psychoanalytic theory, clinical social psychology, and cultural anthropology (Rook 1988). Indeed, early works can be linked to Freud and Jung, as well as a large base of literature in psychology. Rook (2006) traces the use of projective techniques from its heyday between 1940–1960, including appearing in major academic and trade texts to its waning popularity in the 1970s in favor of other methods. He points to its resurgence especially due to a series of publications from academics at Northwestern University led by Levy (1985), Rook (1988), Heisley and Levy (1991), McGrath et al. (1993), Zaltman (1997), among others as well as academic interest in “consumers’ emotions, desires, motivations and brand meanings and relationships.” (2016, 144). While some scholars critiqued the techniques for being prone to researcher subjectivity, particularly in the interpretation of data (see Boddy 2005), and possibly hindering reliability and validity, Rook (2006) offered some counterarguments, pointing to Levy’s (1996) work on subjectivity related to statistical data interpretation as compared to analysis of ‘non-traditional’ data analysis (i.e. stories, images). Rook reiterated the strengths of projective techniques as “relatively free from social desirability bias,” as they allow the researcher to access primary motivations and to build theory (2016, 146).

Projective techniques are of vital importance to consumer researchers as they allow additional and complementary insights into consumers’ thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences. They offer richness to the data and illuminate insights that otherwise may not emerge through more ‘traditional’ methods. Whether it is sensitive topical areas (e.g., consumption of stigmatized goods) or areas of investigation that have rich cultural dimensions (e.g., mealtimes), they provide a means to bring the story to life. Moreover, over time, projective techniques have evolved in their use and opened up new and creative paths for researchers. Armed with richer data and better stories, researchers can engage in storytelling that makes an impact in the research community and beyond. Next, we provide a brief overview of how these techniques have been employed in early consumer research.

Historical Overview of Projective Techniques

Various forms and uses

Rook (2006) outlines various forms of projective techniques including word association, sentence completion, symbol matching, cartoon tests, object personification, shopping list analysis, picture drawing, autodrawing, thematic storytelling, dream exercises, collage constructions, and psychodrama—although variations of these have emerged over the years. Consumer researchers, in particular, have successfully used projective techniques, most often in conjunction with complementary techniques such as focus groups or interviews.



Projection can take various forms from text-based such as the bubble approach, and/or sentence completions, to more visual-based such as, photographs, visual diaries, the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, collage constructions, using ads to elicit responses, and many more. For instance, in a text-based approach, McGrath et al. (1993, 177) use sentence completion as one way in their study of gift giving to gain insights (e.g., complete the sentence, “the gift I treasure the most...” Other projective techniques are more visual-based. Past scholarship (e.g., Belk et al. 1989; Heisley and Levy 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) has used pictures as stimuli to explore subconscious thoughts and consumption practices among consumers. In this vein, Coulter et al. (2001) hold that giving consumers’ control of the visual images allows for the most important issues to become salient. Indeed, scholarship has noted that much communication is nonverbal, and that higher-order constructs can be articulated through the use of visual images. Visual images and projective techniques have been used in a variety of consumer, advertising, and marketing research contexts, including exploring gift-giving (McGrath et al. 1993), mealtime rituals (Chitakunye and Maclaran 2014), attitudes and consumer responses to advertising and media (Russell, Schau, and Crockett 2013; Coulter et al. 2001; Zayer 2010), consumer desires (Belk et al. 2003), and consumer-brand relationships (Chaplin and John 2005; Zayer and Neier 2011).

Historical Overview of Projective Techniques

One of the best known projective techniques is the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), developed by Zaltman (1997). This involves semi-structured, in-depth interviews focused on visual images that individuals choose from mediums such as magazines, newspapers, artwork, photographs, and now, online images. The ZMET interview employs several steps including: storytelling, missed images, Kelly Repertory Grid (Kelly 1963) and laddering, sensory images, the vignette and the summary image. Through a process of metaphorical expressions, thematic categories, conceptual metaphors and deep metaphors, data is analyzed (Coulter et al. 2001). For a richer description of the ZMET method, we point readers to another chapter in this edited book (see Coulter in this book).

Another visual-based method that has gained traction in consumer research is the collage technique. In this method, individuals construct collages using visual images. For example, early work by Chaplin and John (2005a) used collages to examine self-brand connections among children. Children were provided a board which posed the question 'Who Am I?' as well as a series of premade items categorized into five themes- sports, hobbies, personality traits, brand names, and TV/movie characters. Collage construction is also used with adults. For instance, Zayer and Neier (2011) explored consumer-brand relationships with men who actively consumed fashion and grooming products: men constructed collages of their gender identities to contextualize their consumption and shopping behaviors.

In summary, amongst the wide array of techniques available to the researcher, Rook (2006) summarizes the main advantage of projective techniques as employing indirect questioning with stimuli that are often purposefully ambiguous, offering a high degree of freedom to the respondent to allow for open-ended responses. Projective techniques have a rich history in marketing and consumer research and can take various forms and uses. They provide methods that generate rich data as a stand alone method, but also allow for triangulation and/or complement other methods. We now turn to best practices for collecting and analyzing data with projective techniques, especially with visual images.

Collecting and Analyzing Projective Data



This section was informed by the literature as well as interviews with consumer researchers who have worked extensively with projective techniques. It outlines the essential functions of the stimuli selected for the projective tasks, discusses the respective roles of the participant in the task and the researcher in collecting and analyzing projective data, and finally reviews some of the ethical considerations.

Role of the Projective Task

Perhaps the most essential aspect of using projective techniques is the selection of tasks or stimuli. In order to identify tasks that will help the participant reflect, it is helpful to consider the essential functions of stimuli (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Essential Functions of Projective Tasks



Collecting and Analyzing Projective Data

01. RECALL Trigger Memory

Simple creative tasks allow focus and reflection on mundane activities. One researcher shares that projective techniques are especially useful when the topic of inquiry involves “Everyday life activities that (participants) tend to forget” such as daily meals, routines or items in one’s kitchen cupboard that one tends not to think about (Chang Coupland 2005).

In addition to triggering memory, projective tasks are less subject to the social desirability bias that sometimes surfaces in more direct questioning. The indirect nature of the tasks allow the participant a free and unsupervised setting to think about their daily life. This can uncover more insights. For instance, in their research on family meals, direct questioning suggested that moms prepared every meal entirely from scratch with freshly made ingredients. By contrast, the collages the moms created included ready to eat pizzas and easy to prepare dishes. The projective tasks allowed the mothers to become more aware of their actual behaviors and served as a vehicle for them to express their struggles to reconcile the wish to provide healthful and nutritious meals for their children and the realities of busy and modern lifestyles.

02. ELABORATE Relive & Describe

The involving nature of projective tasks makes them ideal for participants to relive and think deeply about the focal topic. However, because the tasks are creative and ambiguous, not all participants may be comfortable. The researchers we interviewed shared for instance that, whereas children engage in drawing tasks rather naturally (see for example, Figure 2), adults tend to be more inhibited, and the less visually inclined participants may be reticent. As such, offering a variety of tasks is important. For instance, Belk et al. (2003) employed a variety of projective techniques: collages, associations, and fairy tales, to investigate the nature of people's desires.

Collages are often preferred because they are colorful, fun and do not require special skills to create. One researcher shares that providing the raw materials (magazines) allows everyone to have the same materials to pick from but removes “any differences between individuals...because of the materials they had accessible to them.”

Collecting and Analyzing Projective Data

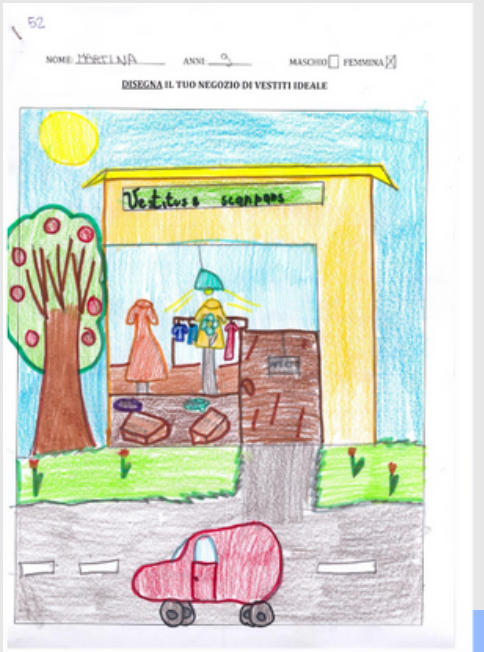


Figure 2: A child's drawing based on a projective task. Drawing provided by researcher Stefania Borghini.

03. SELF-REFLECT Introspect

The fun nature of projective tasks reduces inhibitions and allows participants to express themselves freely: "Laughter is the best medicine they say. ... They can let their brain rest." In the process of creating and then discussing their creation, participants generate a narrative that connects the elements of their creation and threads the items together. Because these elements can be contradictory and of disparate origin, their analysis reveals insights into the relationships between self and objects (Lahire 2018), and thus allows self-reflection.

For instance, in Russell et al.'s (2013) collage task, participants selected a character from a TV series and created a digital collage of products and services that they could envision the focal character using in a typical day. The researchers relied on these collages to guide interviews about the series which gave them access to the ways in which the informants related to the media images and messages therein. The collages prevented participants' rationalization and social desirability biases to explore consumption's implications beyond more explicit processes whereby brands serve as vehicles of self-definition and communication (Schau and Gilly 2003). The projective tasks unearthed more latent identity positions reflected (or not) in the media such as discourses of gender, ethnicity, race or social class.

Collecting and Analyzing Projective Data

04. ACCESS Tap into the Unconscious

The initial impetus for developing and using projective techniques was to access the unconscious. By engaging informants into magical and absurd stories, the metaphorical process of projective tasks enables access to latent content that escapes rational reasoning (Zaltman 1997). For instance, Del Bucchia et al. (2021) asked participants to create either a dream or a nightmare collage about the ways in which technology mediates their consumption journeys. The metaphor of the dreams allowed access to deeper reflections, sometimes fairytale-like that revealed feelings of empowerment, but also much darker, haunting concerns about the ways in which technology controls them, which the researchers identified as latent vulnerability.

The ambiguous nature of projective tasks reduces inhibitions. In consumer research, many consumption topics can be taboo or uncomfortable to discuss, such as toilet paper or personal hygiene. Projecting and speaking indirectly allows a safe space for participants to think about these topics in ways that direct questioning might not. For instance, one researcher shares: "Sometimes you get giggles because people say provocative things in the cartoon balloons."

Role of the Participant

Projecting into a scene or telling a story makes it easier for participants to recall, elaborate, and engage in self-reflexivity, so that researchers can gain insights into their thoughts and feelings. Most projective tasks are accompanied by more direct exchange between participant and researcher, whether individually or in group. The hope is that stimuli trigger conversation and exchange about the participant's experience.

With projective techniques, the informant has "increased voice and authority in interpreting consumption events" (Heisley and Levy 1991, 257). Projecting onto the scene, the participant becomes the object of the exchange and this allows them to verbalize the experience as if they were experiencing it for real. As one researcher put it "it gets the juices flowing and then eases the interview process."

Collecting and Analyzing Projective Data

Role of the Researcher

The researcher has many responsibilities in projective techniques. As discussed above, the researcher selects stimuli that have the most potential to engage the participant and trigger a rich exchange. When accompanied by interviews or focus groups, projective tasks can be viewed as a form of autodiving. In autodiving, participants see and hear their own behavior through photos and video, offering their emic, or insider perspectives directly to researchers (Heisley and Levy 1991). The first role of the researcher is to select tasks that will ensure access to these emic insights. As one researcher reminds us that 'you do learn overtime' and recalls their first foray into the world of projective techniques:



"Some of these pictures that I wanted people to tell a story about this picture, what's happening, how does it end, they just struck out. They didn't touch the ritual elements that I wanted to throw indirectly. With pretesting, now I got better at it. You knew what kind of pictures are going to elicit more material."

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During the Task Creation Itself

An essential role of the researcher is to provide instructions in an understandable manner yet remain unobtrusive during the process. One researcher shares their process whereby they provide reassurance and clarity to the participant during the task:



They get at it, they flip through the pages, and then I walk around and they say, "So what am I supposed to do?" "Whatever, (topic). What does (topic) bring to your mind? Whatever comes to your mind." "So what should I be doing?" "There's nothing that you should be doing. Flip through the pages, look at the pictures. If something comes to your mind that resonates with that picture, cut that picture out and put it on your piece."

Oftentimes, it's important for the researcher to frame these creative tasks in the most fun and engaging manner.

Collecting and Analyzing Projective Data

During the Discussion

In addition to the projective task itself, the researcher may interview participants about their creation. In such interviews, the researcher uses the projective task as an elicitation tool to unearth rich insights about the consumption phenomenon. The researcher guides this discussion, often beginning with the simplest of questions such as “tell me a story.” Through the cues contained in their creation, participants can verbalize their mental states, goals and sometimes sensations. The interview tends to be semi-structured and toggles back and forth between describing the contents of the task and the actual interview questions. For instance, an experienced researcher shares their opening question for interviews based on collages, and how they tag back and forth between asking about the task and the interview protocol:

”

“Tell me about how it is that you picked these up. What made you choose these among a whole bunch of other things in the magazine?”

[...]

So depending on what comes out and what doesn't come out, I switch... sometimes we go back and forth. You go back to the interview, and then when I ask a particular question, since they've just done the collage, their thoughts are there, they might go back and use something from the collage once more. So it's not cut and dry first this and then that. It's much more, it gets the juices flowing and then eases the interview process.”

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During the Analysis

The creations generated in the projective tasks not only allow participants to make meaning of their experience but also become the raw materials for the researchers to interpret. These materials allow the researchers to engage reflexively and triangulate the contents of the tasks with the observations made during the creation process as well as insights from the participants' interviews (Pink 2015). But as one researcher reminds us, interpretation of qualitative data always engages the data collected with theory: “the whole interpretation ideally should come from theory in dialogue with the data.”

Collecting and Analyzing Projective Data

Yet, because the tasks are ambiguous, interpretation can be difficult and researchers may not always agree with each other's interpretation. One researcher who collected projective tasks across cultures shares that the author team, who was also cross-cultural, often had different interpretations. The team of authors would spend days looking at the visual data collected through the projectives and all the notes (laid out on large tables in a dedicated room) and exchanged on their interpretations:



"We went around going through our interpretations and the points that we disagreed on [...] the differences pertain to the insider's view versus the outsider's view so that becomes important. [...] And that's extremely useful for a deeper, richer interpretation."

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Reporting the Results

Finally, an important responsibility of the researcher is to allow the reader to appreciate the connection between the projective task and the findings. Like anthropologists do in their print materials (books or articles), researchers should provide sample visuals of the projective tasks so that readers do not rely solely on the written words. See for instance, the visual exhibits in Belk et al.'s (2003) consumption desire article, Del Bucchia et al.'s (2021) technology empowerment as latent vulnerability, Russell et al.'s (2013) on homophilization in media, Drenten's (2014) market-mediated milestones in adolescent coming-of-age experiences. Most recently, Kondakciu, Souto, and Zayer (2022) asked Millennial consumers to construct collages of their gender(s) using images from their social media platforms, where the sources of visuals are seemingly endless, showing contemporary uses of the collage technique as well as bringing the informants' stories to life (see Figure 3).

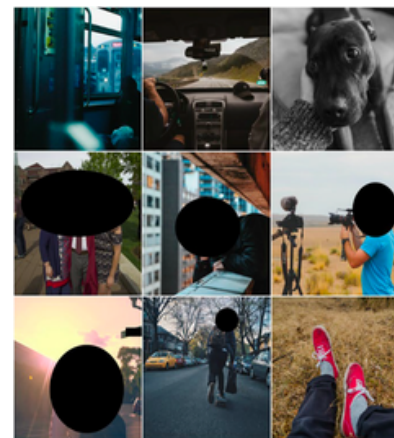


Figure 3: Jake, an informant, in the study by Kondakciu et al. (2022) uses images from his social media platform to create a collage of his gendered expressions online.

Ethical Considerations

Because they tap into latent thoughts and feelings and reduce inhibitions, projective techniques are sometimes criticized as “intrusive procedures that trick respondents into giving information that they would otherwise not be inclined to provide” (Rook 2006, 153). Yet, these concerns may not be unique to projective techniques and the same ethical requirements should apply to the use of indirect techniques as any other direct questioning.

When researching vulnerable populations, such as children, care should be taken. The creative nature of projective tasks, such as drawings, can open up many unexpected topics, which makes it impossible to anticipate in an a priori informed consent process. As one researcher who studies children cautions, ethics committees recommend that the researchers not interact with children about their tasks without the presence of their parents.

Of course, like all human subjects research, especially sensitive topics require thoughtful consideration. Due to their indirect nature and ability to dig deep, projective tasks may reveal sensitive facets even when the context is seemingly benign. As an example, research about shopping and favorite stores may uncover deep insights about participants’ personal biographies and in so doing bring to the surface ‘epiphanic life stories’ and other facets of identity that might have remained untapped with more direct questioning (Borghini et al. 2021). These concerns may be even more salient in the digital world, to which we turn to next.



Projective Techniques in the Digital Age

Digital technology unlocks an array of possibilities for updating projective techniques. Traditional projective techniques, such as word association, sentence completion, and others, enable participants to share their opinions and beliefs in ways they may not be able to directly verbalize. In the digital age, consumers turn to social media and other technologies to similarly share opinions and beliefs—even without a direct prompt. Possibilities in the digital age not only constitute how digital media can be incorporated into projective techniques but also how existing norms of digital culture might be used in such methodologies. Speaking the language of the internet (i.e. the linguistic particularities) (McCulloch 2019) is especially useful for researching younger generations of consumers who have grown up with social media and are deeply embedded in digital culture. As such, we can envision possibilities for digitally-enabled projective techniques across three domains: association tasks, construction tasks, and completion tasks. *After each descriptive section, we offer examples of how existing projective techniques might be updated in the digital age.*

Association Tasks

Association tasks provide a stimulus—such as a photograph or word—and ask participants to reply with the first thing that comes to mind. The stimulus acts as a trigger, prompting respondents to share their thoughts and feelings. Traditional association tasks ask consumers to reflect upon pictures portraying people (personality associations), to describe situations connected to a given domain (situational associations), or to choose images—out of a selection of options—that best reflect a topic (forced associations; see Comi et al. 2014). The digital age offers a nearly endless supply of visual content that may be similarly employed in association tasks—from social media posts to stock photos. Social media content can be coupled with interviews to elicit rich responses from consumers. In a study of how consumers’ use social media to navigate risk-laden life experiences, Drenten and Zayer (2018) use participants’ personal Pinterest boards as prompts for the interviews. The Pinterest boards stimulated reflective discussion that may otherwise have been omitted.

On social media, many images are already aggregated through user-generated content. For example, social media users increasingly manage “shoutout pages,” which solicit, aggregate, and repost other users’ content along with tagging the original user — thus, giving the shoutout (Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler, 2020). These curatorial social media pages provide more authentic, consumer-driven compilations of visual content that may be used as prompts in association tasks. For example, the popular Instagram page Influencers in the Wild (@influencersinthewild; 4.8 million followers) captures

Projective Techniques in the Digital Age

paparazzi-style, user-submitted photos and videos of everyday people capturing online content in their everyday lives. Such imagery might be used as personality association wherein consumers respond to images portraying people and reflect upon the role of influencer culture in society.

Researchers can draw upon free resources to generate imagery for association tasks. For instance, websites such as Unsplash.com and Pixabay.com offer free-to-use, high quality imagery. This is even more critical when creating representative imagery to use as stimuli in association tasks. Nappy.com, for instance, offers “beautiful photos of Black and Brown people, for free. For commercial and personal use.” Thus, the digital age releases researchers from the expectation of developing imagery themselves; rather, they can draw upon the exceptional digital content already in the online marketplace. Lastly, word associations can also be facilitated through digital technologies. In large group settings (e.g., classrooms), participants can submit words via anonymous polling software such as Mentimeter and PollEverywhere. Such platforms can provide results in real-time in the form of word clouds and responses can be saved for later analysis.

Digital Extensions for Association Tasks

Using existing social media content as a prompt for imagery associations

Researchers use participants’ existing social media content, such as a Pinterest board, as a prompt for interview responses

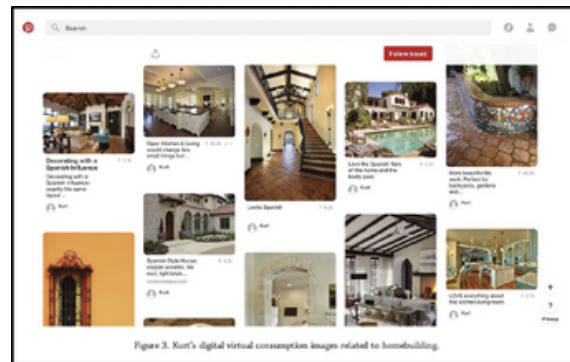
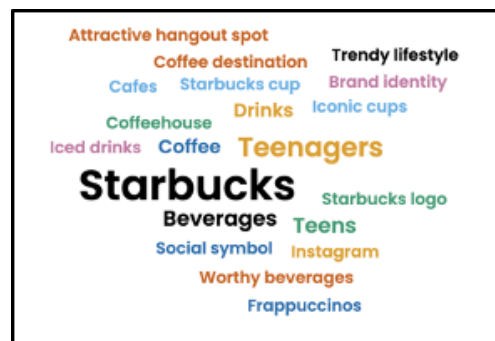


Figure 3. Kurt's digital virtual consumption images related to homebuilding.

Using digital technologies to facilitate word associations

Researchers ask a class of students, “What comes to mind when you think of Starbucks?” and submit their answers via PollEverywhere digital platform, producing live results on screen



Projective Techniques in the Digital Age

Construction Tasks

Construction tasks ask consumers to state how they believe others would behave, feel, or think (Will et al. 1996). Third person questions and bubble drawings are common construction tasks. Collages and visual mood boards have also been used to capture perceptions of brands in relation to other people. For instance, Hofstede et al. (2007) invited consumers to create mood boards in which they matched magazine cutouts of celebrities with the beers brands they expected each person to enjoy. Construction tasks, such as collages, have historically been developed using analog magazines. The same format can be updated in the digital age using free graphic design platforms. For example, to explore tween girls' identities, Cody (2012) opted against child-like glue and marker collages and instead asked participants to construct e-collages by selecting from 183 previously downloaded images related to brands, interests, products discussed in prior interviews. Canva is a free-to-use graphic design platforms with pre-made templates and drag-and-drop capabilities. The user-friendly site offers a digital space for respondents to create mood boards, collages, or other visual responses to a given prompt. Further, platforms such as Canva enable collaborative collage-making, which offers rich insights across participants in traditional collage-making (Bröckerhoff and Seregina 2021).

As discussed previously, construction tasks can enable consumers to openly respond without directly stating their own personal beliefs. A trade-off is that construction tasks often elicit social stereotypes and normative exemplars. Similar stereotyping is already native to digital culture. Therefore, consumer researchers can rely on digital resources that parallel analog construction tasks. For example, a common trend on social media platforms like Reddit is to create and share "starter packs," which are visual images "consisting of one or more images accompanied by (1) titles providing commentary and/or context and (2) illustrating a prototype of a cultural artifact, member of a community, or shared experience" (Eschler and Menking 2018, 2). Starter packs capture culturally complex messages of social identity in simplified formats. A starter pack is prompted by an experience (e.g., the first time at Coachella starter pack), location (e.g., the European big city starter pack), or type of person (e.g., the Gen Z starter pack). These images reflect brands that are affiliated with a particular identity, thus reflecting both brand image and consumer culture. Consumer researchers can prompt respondents to create starter packs as a tool for conveying perceptions of consumer collectives (e.g., Harley Davidson bikers, gamer girls, fatshionistas, trekkies, hipsters) which would reveal sociocultural stereotypes consumers may not readily admit. Asking participants to construct content in formats native to digital culture can also extend to types of social media posts (e.g., creation of a "typical" Instagram post).

Projective Techniques in the Digital Age

Digital Extensions for Construction Tasks

Constructing online collages via digital software (e.g., Canva)

Researchers ask participants to create digital collages using online imagery to represent Gen Z



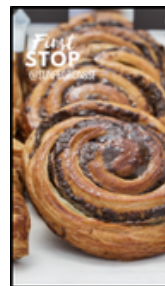
Constructing visuals in formats native to digital culture

Researchers ask participants to construct a “starter pack” for someone who is deemed “basic,” often slang for someone uninteresting



Constructing social media content for imagined individuals

Researchers tell participants, “Imagine you are an influencer going on a 3-day trip to a big city of your choice sponsored by a hotel brand. Create a series of posts for your Instagram story while you are on the trip.”



Projective Techniques in the Digital Age

Completion Tasks

Completion tasks ask participants to finish, or complete, a prompt. The most common is a sentence completion task but other examples include tale completion tasks in which respondents are given a written or visual story and then asked to develop a longer narrative based on the prompt.

Digital media reflects an existing culture of storytelling and much of the content posted online already follows a similar format. For example, memes are images, videos, or pieces of text that are copied and spread from person to person on the internet. These common cultural elements of digital media invite consumers to engage in replication by adopting the format structure of a memetic style and infusing it with their own perspective. Memes enable consumers to simplify their ideas and distribute them without much effort.

Mememes provide insight into marketplace trends and consumer behavior (Campos and Gomez 2016) and offer methodological potential parallel to completion tasks. For example, “distracted boyfriend” is one of the most famous visual meme structures. In the stock image, a heterosexual couple is walking along a city sidewalk, holding hands. The man’s head is turned behind him, gawking at a woman walking by while his girlfriend looks on in disgust. The meme structure invites consumers to overlay text on the image to represent real-life things that distract people. This prompts consumers to naturally share inner thoughts and feelings, packaged in the meme layout. Because meme structures, such as the “distracted boyfriend,” are widely understood in the language of the internet (McCulloch 2019), researchers can use these visuals as prompts in completion tasks (see Table 1). Mememes can also be text-based. For instance, marketer and creative director, Nathan Allebach, curated a Google Doc[1] with over 100 pages of examples of commonly used text-based mememes, such as “you’re in her DMs [direct messages], i’m (x), we are not the same.” This parody meme first went viral in 2019 and continues to be used to reflect both self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating comparisons. Users posted humorous riffs on the statement such as “you are in her DMs, I’m in her Animal Crossing town. We are not the same” and “you’re in her DMs, I’m in the group chat she’s sending the screenshots to.” From a research perspective, scholars could use other similar text-based meme structures in lieu of traditional sentence completion tasks.

Across social media platforms, storytelling affordances provide opportunities for digitally-enabled completion tasks. Sound-based mememes similarly offer opportunities for completion tasks. For instance, Vizcaino-Verdu and Abidin (2021) suggest music based mememes on TikTok enable a form of in-group storytelling. Similarly, on YouTube,

Projective Techniques in the Digital Age

Individuals share narratives called “storytimes” in which they recount first-person experiences. The practices of storytelling on social media can be adapted for completion tasks in the digital age. For example, on TikTok, “stitch” is a creation tool that allows consumers to combine another video on TikTok with one they are creating. Creators will invite others to partake in stitching by starting their videos with open-ended question prompts and telling the audience to “stitch this” with their answers. Researchers can invite participants to create video responses to open-ended prompts related to thoughts and feelings about brands or other consumption behaviors. For example, a researcher might couple the “stitch this” directive with the question, “If brands were real people, who would you invite to your party and why?” Responses would provide insights into brand personification, personality, and perceptions. The results may offer narrative stories similar to traditional tale completion tasks. Potential trade-offs in this approach are that consumers who respond to stitched videos on a public platform like TikTok may be influenced by the performative aspects of social media and sampling is less controllable. To mitigate this, researchers could emulate “stitching” in a research lab setting rather than on a public social media platform.

Digital Extensions for Completion Tasks

Completing visual or text-based meme formats

Researchers invite participants to overlay text on a the “distracted boyfriend” meme format by imagining their friend already owns one item but wants to replace it with something



Completing story-driven digital content based on researcher stated prompts

Researcher invites participants to create stitched videos on TikTok based on the prompt, “If brands were real people, who would you invite to your party and why?”



Future Possibilities

Conclusion

Projective techniques have a long, fruitful history in consumer research. Our chapter offers potential for advancing such methodologies by integrating the capabilities and cultures of digital media. Further, projective techniques in the digital world fosters increased accessibility and affordability for conducting such research. Lastly, the directions suggested here are not meant to replace existing offline projective techniques; rather, the digital world enables a broadening of projective techniques which might be combined with other methodologies to foster richer insights.

About the Authors



Linda Tuncay Zayer is Professor of Marketing and the John F. Smith Chair in Business Administration at the Quinlan School of Business at Loyola University Chicago, USA. Her research takes a transformative approach to understanding advertising and consumer behavior, particularly as it relates to gender, identity, and representation and she often utilizes a range of qualitative methods in her work. She serves on the boards of several organizations, such as the SeeHer Education Advisory Board and GENMAC and is part of the working group for Gender Equality for the United Nations Principles in Responsible Education initiative. She holds leadership and editorial review roles for various advertising and consumer research journals. Her expertise and scholarship have been featured in the top journals in her field and in various media outlets across television, newspapers, radio, books, podcasts and other digital media, including the New York Times, Washington Post, and others.



Cristel Antonia Russell is Professor of Marketing at Pepperdine University's Graziadio Business School. Cristel's research, at the intersection of entertainment, marketing, and policy, focuses on everything related to narrative. She is a fan of interdisciplinary research and multiple approaches, from experimental psychology to qualitative interviews with projective techniques. Her health and prevention-related research has earned funding from the U.S. National Institutes of Health and a Marie Curie fellowship from the European Union. As a result of this diversity of foci and approaches, her research appears in many disciplines and journals amongst which the Journal of Consumer Research, the Journal of Academy of Marketing Science (JAMS) and the Journal of Public Policy & Marketing. She is also the proud coauthor of the latest (14th!) edition of the Consumer Behavior textbook with Michael Solomon.



Jenna Drenten is Associate Professor of Marketing in the Quinlan School of Business at Loyola University Chicago, USA. Her research explores digital consumer culture: how digital culture—from social media algorithms to the attention economy—structures consumption ideologies and how consumers' lived experiences are mediated, translated, and commodified through digital culture. Her research also advances innovative approaches and ethical standards for using social media in qualitative methodologies. Her work has been published in leading marketing and media studies journals such as Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Advertising, New Media & Society, and Feminist Media Studies, among others. She serves as Associate Editor at the Journal of Advertising Research and as the Communications Chair for Gender, Markets, and Consumers (GENMAC). Her expertise has been featured in media outlets including The Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, The Washington Post, Mashable, VICE, Vox, and more.