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TESTING ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF MEASURING READERSHIP AMONG CHILDREN

BACKGROUND

India has witnessed three National Readership Surveys, the last one being in 1983-84. As in the case of the UK NRS, the Indian study is confined to adults (aged 15 years and above). Three NRSs have employed the Recent Reading technique (using mastheads of individual publications) to measure readership.

In 1985-86, Mediasearch, the Specialist Media Research Division of MARG Marketing and Research Group Pvt Ltd, carried out the Up-market Media Survey (UMS). In this study, the Grouped Titles method (as currently used in the UK NRS) was used to measure readership.

Over the past few years, with increasing affluence and literacy in metropolitan India, many advertisers and advertising agencies are keen to obtain readership estimates among children in affluent households, who are emerging as decision-makers and influencers in a number of product categories. To meet this need, Mediasearch decided to launch the Children's Media Survey (CMS).

The question that Mediasearch wanted to answer for itself concerned the method to be used to measure readership among children. Were it possible to use the same method among adults and children, it would, at some stage, be possible to lower the age cut-off in the NRS and extend it 'downwards' to children. This need to

assess the relative standing of alternative methods is the rationale behind this paper.

Mediasearch decided to test three alternative methods to assess readership. The three methods were:

- (1) The masthead method
- (2) The grouped masthead method (a variation of the grouped titles method) and
- (3) The playing card method (which is explained in the section on 'Design of the study').

OBJECTIVE AND EVALUATING CRITERIA

The specific objectives for this study were to:

- (a) examine whether the Average Issue Readership (AIR) estimates obtained through the three methods – namely masthead, grouped masthead and playing method – are comparable.
- (b) establish which of the three methods yields most stable frequency of reading data – as measured by repeating the same method interview with the same respondent after a gap of two weeks.
- (c) evaluate the three methods on the accuracy of 'the last occasion of reading' recall.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The methods

Three alternative research methods were used to measure readership:

(i) The masthead method which has been used in the NRSs in India and which was being used in the UK prior to 1984.

(ii) The grouped masthead method which is a variation of the grouped titles method currently being used in the UK. In this method, instead of the titles being typed out, the card carries the (reduced) mastheads of the various publications. Reduced mastheads were used (rather than the typed names of the publications) because it was felt that it would facilitate recognition of the titles, particularly among respondents who were 'semi-literate'.

(iii) The 'playing card' method which is a 'mixture' of the masthead method and the grouped masthead method. In this method, the masthead of each publication is reproduced on a card, roughly the same size as a playing card.

The cards are 'bunched' together so that similar titles appear one after the other. In fact, the groupings and the number of groups were identical to those in the grouped masthead method.

The interview proceeds as follows:

The interviewer removes all masthead cards from a brown envelope and spreads out the (four) cards of the first group, each card next to the other (ie cards one to four), in front of the respondent. The respondent is then asked to indicate his frequency of reading each publication by distributing the cards on a large white sheet with three columns, each

corresponding to the three frequencies 'almost always' (at least three issues out of four), 'quite often' (at least one issue out of four) and 'only occasionally' (less than one issue out of four). The respondent is asked to set aside all the publications that he had not read or looked at in the past year for even two minutes. All the masthead cards that are spread on the white sheet are bundled together for subsequent questioning. The interviewer now repeats this process with the masthead cards of the second group and so on. At the end of each group, the interviewer ties all the cards spread on the white sheet and puts them together. All cards placed outside the white sheet (ie the ones pertaining to publications not read or looked at in the past one year) are kept inside the brown envelope to avoid their being mixed together with other cards which were spread out on the sheet. The interviewer now spreads out a red sheet in front of the respondent which has columns corresponding to the last occasion of reading ie yesterday, past seven days, past 14 days, past one month, past two months, past three months and longer ago. The respondent is given the bundled cards of the first group (ie all the mastheads of publications for which respondent had claimed a non-zero frequency in the previous question) and is asked to distribute them on the large red sheet to indicate when he had last read or looked at the corresponding publications. This process is repeated for each of the groups. Both the frequency scale and the coding scale for the last occasion of reading used in this method were identical to the scales used in the grouped masthead method.

The location

The study was confined to Bombay because of three major reasons:

(i) Bombay is a cosmopolitan city and, to a greater extent than any other city, represents the linguistic diversity of India.

(ii) Bombay has the highest number of publications covered in the NRS.

(iii) Bombay is the most affluent city in the country and children in this city are more likely to influence purchase decisions.

The target group

The target group comprised children in the age group 10 to 13 years. Moreover, the research was confined to those children who came from households where the monthly household income exceeded Rs.1500. This cut-off helped to eliminate children in the middle and lower income group households where the discretionary income is limited.

The two studies

This research project was divided into two studies:

- the first study with a comparatively larger sample (75 for each of the three methods) aimed primarily at frequency validation.
- the second study (with a sample of 12 per method) aimed solely at validation of the last reading occasion.

In the first study, the child was administered an interview and the same interview was carried out (using the same method) two weeks later. Both interviews were conducted by the same interviewer.

In the second study, the first interview was an ordinary readership interview, which was followed on the very next day by the second detailed and intensive interview carried out by a research executive (Belson 1981).

Selection of the sample

The sample of children in the three panels was matched on sex of child, medium of instruction and household income.

An attempt was made also to match respondents on age, mother tongue and father's occupation.

The interview

The interview was conducted in the language with which the child was most familiar.

In case of the masthead method, monthlies were shown first, followed by fortnightlies, weeklies and dailies. The order of the periodicity was not rotated but, within each periodicity, mastheads were rotated (two rotations: forward and reverse).

In the grouped masthead method, there was a full rotation of the cards and, in the playing card method also, the cards were fully rotated.

Each interviewer conducted an almost equal number of interviews for each method.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork for the study was conducted in July and August 1988.

FINDINGS

Comparison of gross average issue readership

We examined the Average Issue Readership (AIR) for various publication groups. The AIR

estimates presented in Table 1 are based on the first interview. It is immediately evident from this analysis that the grouped masthead method produces higher AIR estimates than the masthead method for almost all publication groups. Gujarati publications are the only exception for which the AIR estimates produced by the grouped masthead method are lower than those produced by the masthead method.

The AIR estimates produced by the playing card method are always lower than those produced by the grouped masthead method. However, when compared with the masthead method, the playing card method produces somewhat lower AIR estimates for dailies and weeklies but higher AIR estimates for fortnightly and monthlies. Similarly, the playing card method produces higher AIR estimates for English and Hindi publications but significantly lower AIR estimates for Gujarati publications. AIR estimates of Marathi publications produced by the playing card method and the masthead method are on par.

Compared with the masthead method, the playing card method produces much higher AIR estimates for children's magazines (in fact, as high as the grouped masthead method). For sports magazines, the AIR estimates produced by the playing card method are marginally higher than those produced by the masthead method. While the AIR estimates for general interest magazines produced by the two methods are on par, the playing card method produces lower AIR estimates both for film and women's magazines than those generated by the masthead method.

Thus, on the whole, relative AIR estimates produced by the playing card method vis-à-vis the masthead method do not follow any clear pattern.

Frequency validation

As mentioned earlier, in the first study, each respondent was re-interviewed, after a two week period, so as to validate the frequency of reading data. Since the frequency scales used for the three methods were not comparable, the data had to be 'normalised' prior to comparison. The 'normalised' difference ('d') between the two readings was calculated as follows:

$$'d' = \frac{f1 - f2}{w}$$

where $f1$ = frequency obtained from the first interview

$f2$ = frequency obtained from the second interview

w = width of the scale

It needs to be clarified that the width of the scale was not defined in terms of total number of points on the scale but in the terms of the difference between the highest and the lowest frequency values. Thus 'w' would be seven for the frequency scale of a 'daily' since the highest value is seven – corresponding to seven days a week frequency – and lowest is 0 – corresponding to 'none'.

The square of the normalised difference was considered to be an appropriate measure of the frequency dispersion since it had a built-in higher weight for greater distance. Table 2 presents the frequency variation of the three methods. As can be observed, the masthead method produces the more stable frequency of reading data compared with the other two methods. Even if one were to look at the absolute variations, about 9% of the observations in the playing card method and 12% of the

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Table 1

Average issue readership

Publication group	Masthead		Grouped masthead		Playing card	
	%	Index	%	Index	%	Index
Base:		75		74		76
Dailies (16)	6.2	100	8.3	134	5.6	91
Weeklies (10)	6.7	100	8.8	132	5.7	84
Fortnightlies (12)	5.8	100	9.1	157	7.0	121
Monthlies (20)	8.7	100	10.3	118	10.4	120
English publications (20)	9.4	100	11.7	124	10.8	115
Hindi publications (18)	4.7	100	8.3	177	5.7	121
Marathi publications (10)	7.1	100	9.3	131	7.1	100
Gujarati publications (10)	6.7	100	5.8	87	4.6	69
Children's magazines (11)	6.7	100	12.0	179	12.0	179
Sports magazines (6)	4.7	100	8.7	185	5.3	113
Film magazines (7)	10.8	100	11.0	102	9.2	85
Women's magazines(5)	5.1	100	7.7	151	3.7	73
General interest magazines (13)	9.0	100	13.3	137	8.9	94

Table 2**Frequency variation across methods**

	Masthead	Grouped masthead	Playing card
Base: Total no of respondent- publication combinations	3146	2251	3146
Frequency variation:	%	%	%
No difference	73.7	69.3	78.3
Difference of 1	14.8	13.1	8.6
Difference of 2	5.8	5.2	3.8
Difference of 3 or more	5.7	12.3	9.3
Average sum of square of normalised difference	0.03795	0.16052	0.1194

observations in the grouped masthead method have the maximum possible variation of three.

The frequency validation was analysed by the following variables:

- language of publication
- type of publication
- periodicity of publication
- household income
- interviewer.

The findings clearly indicate that for every variable the mean sum of squares of the normalised difference was the lowest for the masthead method, followed by the playing card method.

Validation of the last reading occasion

In the second study, the respondents were re-interviewed on the very next day using the 'Belson interview' method to validate the 'last

reading occasion' for up to four magazines for which, on the previous day, the respondent had claimed a non-zero frequency of reading.

Table 3 summarises the 'matches' and the 'mismatches' between the two interviews. Of the three methods, the grouped masthead method has the highest proportion of 'matches' (77%), followed by the masthead method (69%).

Whenever there was a 'mismatch', the child was questioned about the reasons for the 'mismatch'. The main reason for the 'mismatch' was claimed to be 'memory lapses during the first interview'. A number of children also attributed the 'mismatch' to the interviewer not clearly explaining the question, the respondent being distracted, etc (Table 4). In the case of the playing card method, a number of children explained that they did not think carefully before placing the cards, thus suggesting that the involvement with the activity may be interfering with the interview process.

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Table 3**Matches and mismatches of claims across methods**

	No of obser- vations	Matches	Mismatches	% of matches
Method:				
Masthead	39	27	12	69
Grouped masthead	39	30	9	77
Playing card	46	28	18	61

Table 4**Reasons offered by respondents for error in the first round ordinary readership interviews**

	Masthead	Grouped Masthead	Playing card
Confusion/memory lapses during the first interview	9	5	7
Interviewer – interviewee problems	5	3	2
Method related problems	1	-	5
Interview timing related problems	1	1	3
Don't know/Can't say	-	-	1
Base: No of error publications	12	9	18

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the above findings, it would appear that amongst children aged 10-13 years, the masthead method is the most appropriate method since it:

(a) Provides the most stable data on frequency of readership.

(b) Performs almost on par with the grouped titles method on the accuracy of recall of the 'last occasion of reading'.

In view of this, Mediasearch proposes to use the masthead method for the Children's Media

Survey. Thus, the CMS would become an adjunct to the NRS.

Secondly, if the findings of this experiment are confirmed across a larger study covering a wider target group, in terms of income and geographical spread, then there would be a case for lowering the age cut-off for the next NRS.

References

Belson, William (1981). Measuring and then increasing the accuracy of Britain's National Readership Survey: a validation project. New Orleans Proceedings.