



Utilizing the personal science framework to teach research methods and theories in a graduate fashion and merchandising class

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Introduction: At a midsized primarily undergraduate institution in the Northeast, the College of Business offers an MBA with a variety of concentrations, allowing students to focus on particular industries (e.g., hospitality, nonprofit management, sports leadership). Students take the core MBA courses along with four in their concentration. In the fashion merchandising and management concentration, the Concepts and Theories in Fashion and Merchandising class includes original research among its learning objectives as well as the “demonstrate[d] ability to use theory to provide potential frameworks for research.” Time constraints typically make it difficult for students to learn about, develop, implement, and complete an original research project within a single course, especially in an 8-week course, as this class often is. In addition, the students in this program plan to or already work in corporate offices in the fashion industry and will likely not conduct academic research in their careers. A course project had to be designed to achieve the learning objectives while allowing students to explore data in a way that would be relevant in their career paths. Therefore, the Retail Log project was developed in which students examine their own consumer behavior by systematically collecting, analyzing, and applying theories to personal data.

This project builds on the premise of personal science, defined as “using empirical methods to explore personal questions” (Wolf & DeGroot, 2020, p. 2) and a “framework to understand self-tracking” (Senabre Hidalgo, et al., 2021, p. 2). Personal science projects use the researcher’s self-collected data and can be considered “original, self-directed N-of-1 studies” (De Groot, et al., 2017, p. 417). The five “activities” that characterize personal science are Questioning, Designing, Observing, Reasoning, and Discovering (Wolf & DeGroot, 2020), each of which is addressed in the Retail Log project.

Project: The first activity in personal science is *Questioning* or focusing on a topic “directly relevant to the individual asking the questions, and concerning their private life, experiences, and emotions” (Wolf & DeGroot, 2020, p. 2). The question in this case is “How do I shop for apparel, accessories, cosmetics, and hair adornment products?” The second activity is *Designing* the empirical approach. To collect data, students are given a spreadsheet in which they itemize every fashion-related product they buy for the duration of the class. For each purchase, students identify the date, time, item, retailer, channel, and category and describe the reason for purchase, thoughts about the purchase, and reaction to item once worn. This is the *Observing* activity in personal science, in which researchers “deliberately collect and structure observations about one’s own life” (Wolf & DeGroot, 2020, p. 2). At the mid-point of the project, students code their log, create a preliminary coding guide, and write an analytical memo, furthering the Observing activity. This also provides an opportunity for instructor feedback.

Students continue adding items to their log until the end of the project, at which point they complete their analysis, report their results, draw conclusions, and apply theories to help explain or add context to their data. The final output is a report including a revised coding guide, a results section that explores the most common codes, a discussion section that relates two theories or frameworks to the data, a limitations section, and a short conclusion. This report encompasses the fourth and fifth activities in personal science: *Reasoning*, “data exploration, analysis, and visualization, ... and active reflection on one’s own” (Wolf & DeGroot, 2020, p. 3), and *Discovering*, which can include “practical actions to improve daily life” (Wolf & DeGroot, 2020, p. 3) and dissemination. While not all students indicated their intent to integrate their results into their behavior, several did, like one who said “Moving forward, I think I'm going to continue recording my purchases, because it helps me keep track of the reasoning behind it. Having it will keep me accountable and help me step out of my comfort zone more often.” Another said, “I realized that not every Want is a Need, and this has helped me learn budgeting.” In terms of dissemination, in 16-week courses, students present their results to the class.

Results: This project has been implemented three times, and each time the project is slightly revised, typically to include more detailed instructions, examples, and resources. One significant addition was the limitation section, where several students included the concept of analysis bias (“There can be a potential for myself to analyze the data to reaffirm what I think of myself”), which can be an issue in personal science studies.

Overall, students achieved the learning objectives, reported learning more about their own consumer behavior, and identified how this kind of information could be used by fashion professionals. For instance, comments from students included: “By applying the shopping behaviors to theories studied in class, I realized that my brain is busy at work making decisions for me while I make purchases whether I am aware of it or not” and that a report like this could “help marketers and designers target me better by understanding how to attract me with promotions, creativity in designs, and the right people to invoke and influence.” In the three sections of the course, students applied 19 different theories, with the most common being symbolic interactionism, utility theory, and social identity theory.

In sum, this project has been deemed a success in achieving its purpose and while guidelines will likely continue to improve, it will remain an essential component of the Concepts and Theories in Fashion and Merchandising course.

References:

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