The ZMET method: using projective technique to understand consumer home choice

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This study addresses the recent call for researchers to employ qualitative methods to study property-related issues. Although projective techniques have been adopted by motivation researchers in the past, they have never been employed to explore home choice behaviour. Twelve respondents who had recently put an offer in on a house were interviewed about the factors driving their home choice decisions using a projective technique known as ZMET. Findings revealed that ZMET was a powerful tool for encouraging respondents to identify and discuss the factors shaping their home choice decisions. Furthermore, the ZMET interview enabled respondents to express themselves in their own language. Findings revealed deep-seated motives for the respondents' home choices that until now have not been empirically investigated. The paper concludes by discussing the strengths of the ZMET interview and suggests areas for future research.

Keywords Projective technique, Consumer behaviour, Real estate

Background and rationale for the study

Projective techniques have successfully been applied within marketing research to uncover feelings, beliefs, attitudes and motivations that consumers otherwise find difficult to articulate (Webb 2002). Inspiration for the use of projective techniques was gained from the field of clinical psychology where therapists employ the techniques to overcome the problem of communicating with patients who are unable or unwilling to say what they think or how they feel (Westfall et al. 1957; Williams 1957). The adoption of clinical practices such as word association tests, sentence completion, non-directive questioning and picture response to marketing research has enabled consumers to reveal what they might otherwise choose to conceal about their preferences and buying behaviour (Rothwell 1955).

Motivation researchers have also found the adoption of projective techniques to be potent for discovering the unconscious reasons that motivate consumers and for explaining complex consumption behaviours.
Projective techniques have been acknowledged to be fundamental to consumer research because they provide a greater depth of understanding into what people truly think and feel about a product (Boddy 2007; Will et al. 1996). Given the utility of projective techniques it is surprising that they have not yet been employed in research exploring the motivations behind consumers' home choices. Previous research on motivation in housing choice has predominantly been guided by economic considerations whereby motivation is viewed in terms of utilitarian attributes and values. Although illuminating, these positivist and/or quantitative applications have not been able to uncover deeper motivations to answer the "why" questions – why homebuyers end up buying something different than what they initially set out to buy, why they sometimes pay more than what a property is worth, why they buy after viewing only several properties and most importantly, why they chose a particular house and not another. The abundance of unanswered questions highlights the potential to understand more fully the complexity of the home-buying process.

The primary aim of the present study, therefore, is to examine the usefulness of employing a projective technique known as ZMET to understand consumer home choice behaviour. This paper begins with a literature review discussing the methodological issues associated with past motivational research investigating housing choice. Justification is then given concerning the use of a particular projective technique known as ZMET for the present study. Finally, the findings are presented followed by methodological implications to inform future research.

**Literature review**

Real estate research has traditionally been grounded within a positivist framework. Moreover, Levy and Henry (2003), concluded that positivism continues to be the dominant paradigm. Levy and Henry compared the research methods and methodologies reported in real estate journals across different countries. The study found that US journals tend to publish articles exclusively from a positivist standpoint and favour econometric modelling and other forms of quantitative statistical analysis. Although embracing a wider range of analysis, UK and Australian journals also tend to publish articles from a positivist perspective. The dominance of the positivist framework has shaped the nature of research within the area. Property research has predominantly been interested in the relationship between house prices and the physical attributes of a house or the correlation between housing attributes and housing preferences. This tendency of past research to focus on the physical attributes of properties has resulted in a dearth of research exploring home choice behaviour from the consumers' perspective. To this end, Gibler and Nelson (2003) observed that, "analysts stratify real estate markets by property types that are defined by physical construction rather than consumer benefits" (Gibler and Nelson 2003, p. 63).

Property related research has also been dominated by quantitative research methods. Although quantitative methods such as surveys, questionnaires and secondary data can be analysed statistically to generate rigorous and scientific findings, critics have drawn attention to the inability
of these approaches to capture the increasing complexity of residential mobility. For example, Jameson and Nana (2004) who conducted a study on the impact of financial circumstances on tenure choices in New Zealand noted that information about housing affordability is well developed but information about pure preference is sparse.

A further limitation of research investigating motivations in housing choice has been the inherent reliance on either stated or revealed preferences. The stated preference approach is based on intended choices or hypothetical choices. Stated preference methods aim to derive the utility functions that individuals use to make choices (Timmermans et al. 1994). To unravel the utility functions, respondents are presented with profiles (descriptions in terms of relevant attributes) of hypothetical choice alternatives and are asked to express their preference for these profiles. It is argued however, that the hypothetical homebuyer does not have a sound idea of his or her priorities and considerations until confronted with concrete alternatives in a real home buying process. Kroes and Sheldon (1988) suggested that stated preference is only appropriate for experimental testing of hypotheses about the utility value of functional attributes. Despite this limitation, stated housing preferences in housing choice have been used extensively - indeed, Mulder (1996) observed that literature on this subject is vast.

In contrast to stated preference, the revealed preference approach uses observed market choices that individuals make to reveal their underlying preferences and to estimate their value for goods and services. Property researchers who have used the revealed preference approach are typically those who conduct surveys from retrospective data such as recent home purchasers. Actual house purchasers over certain geographical areas are surveyed to generate in-depth statistics such as the price of housing, purchaser characteristics, the household structure of purchasers, time spent looking for a house, method of sale when purchasing a house, method of discovery and number of homes seen before purchase (Crews and Dyhrberg 2004; New Zealand National Research Bureau 2007; Oluwoye 1996; Rossini, 1998). While not discounting the importance of the findings from these studies, survey methods used in the revealed preference approach are limited because they do not allow for a deeper understanding of the motives that determine consumer home choice. Secondary data, surveys and questionnaires yield insights observed by the researcher as an outsider but they also limit the researcher from going beyond mere descriptions of any given phenomenon. This approach is further limited by the time differential between purchase point and survey point. Due to the length of time from purchase to survey, respondents may not recall their home buying decision-making process, nor their initial search criteria.

Another problem evident in property research investigating motivations underlying consumer home choice is the traditional use of multi-attribute attitude indices. These indices consist of attributes involving both financial costs and utilitarian benefits (see Franklin 2000; Boehm 1999; Tu and Goldfinch 1996; Boehm 1982; Timmermans et al. 1994; Park and Lutz 1982; Rodriguez and Sirmans 1994). Although arguably applicable for many studies in real estate that are quantitative in nature, the ranking of housing attributes is problematic when property researchers impose the method on respondents in qualitative studies, particularly those that intend to uncover
important values that drive a consumer’s home choice. In Coolen and van Montfort’s (2001) qualitative study, they asked respondents to sort sixteen housing attributes (generated by the researchers) into three categories. These attributes were utilitarian in nature - number of bedrooms, size of the kitchen, type of house, just to name a few. The respondents were then asked which category was the determining attribute for their home, should they buy a home. A laddering interview was then conducted based on the respondent’s selection of ranked attributes. Although this study provided helpful insights into the ranking of certain attributes, the attributes were predetermined by the researcher and may not have reflected the respondent’s motivations.

Structured interviews, employed by positivist researchers, have also been criticized, with issues raised about the validity and reliability of their findings. It has been suggested that during a structured interview individuals may not be capable of articulating the reasons for their choice since they have little awareness of the nature of the cognitive process that mediates complex behaviour (Lawson et al. 1996; Nakanishi 1974). In addition, some people may only choose to express what they perceive as ideal because they are aware of being observed (Nakanishi 1974). Methods that assist the consumer with identifying and expressing their own motivations, rather than those arising from a positivist framework, are therefore needed.

The limitations of positivist research for understanding home choice behaviour has become a topical issue of late. An important article was published in 2002 by David Clapham highlighting the methodological problems in housing research. In it, he noted that “the housing field is portrayed as an objective reality, which is perceived in uniform ways by the participants in it and is not contentious” (Clapham 2002, p. 59). This claim has been echoed more recently by other researchers in the same field (Black et al. 2003; Diaz III and Hansz 2007; Levy and Lee 2006; Levy and Henry 2003). Concern for the over-emphasised positivist approach and use of quantitative methods is reiterated by Dieleman (2002) when he applauded attempts at developing new ways of looking at the housing field because he believed that this can potentially shed new and fresh perspectives on what housing is and means to people.

**Justification for the use of projective technique**

The aim of the present study was to overcome the limitations inherent in research grounded within a positivist approach by employing a projective technique to understand the unsolicited motives underlying consumers’ home choices. After considering recent acknowledgement in the real estate literature of the limitations of applying quantitative methods based on utilitarian attributes to examine stated and revealed preferences, this study employed a qualitative approach examining the decision making process behind real-life purchases. Examining attitudes associated with real life purchases also overcomes limitations with memory and cognitive dissonance that can be associated with retrospective studies.

This research therefore used an interpretive methodology based on the decision that an emergent design was needed to encourage real homebuyers
to talk freely of the choices they made. Projective techniques were thought to be particularly suitable given that they are designed to surface relevant constructs in consumer decision-making. For example, Donoghue (1998) cited in Donoghue (2000) used unstructured interviews and projective techniques to explore and describe the role of social motives and consumer stereotyping in consumers’ choice of large electrical household appliances. The results of this study revealed consumers’ hidden attitudes, feelings, beliefs and motives that were intimately associated with the decision to buy or not to buy. Donoghue’s study showed that it is possible to use projective techniques to find out from a consumer what the phenomenological characteristics of various products may be, in other words the value character of a product in the consumer’s life and not the physical characteristics of the product (Haire 1950). As such, the employment of a projective technique will be useful in gaining an understanding of real homebuyer’s motivations and actual experiences in the housing decisions they make.

In particular, this study uses The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Method (or more popularly known as ZMET) to investigate the issue at hand. ZMET was first developed for marketing research by Harvard Business School Professor Gerald Zaltman and is the first patented marketing research tool in the United States (Catchings-Castello 2000). The primary objective of ZMET is to gain an in-depth understanding of consumer choice. ZMET was developed by combining research and theory from neurobiology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and art theory (Kelly 2002, Zaltman and Higie 1993). Given that most human meaning is shared nonverbally, ZMET uses visual images gathered and/or generated by consumers to elicit and probe the metaphors that represent their thoughts and feelings about any topic under study (Catchings-Castello 2000; Christensen and Olson 2002; Lee et al. 2003; Sease 2005; Vorell et al. 2003). For this reason, ZMET is projective in nature because it seeks to draw out thoughts and feelings by getting participants to think in terms of metaphors. Like many other projective techniques, ZMET is derived from Freudian psychology and is based on the notion of unconscious and repressed thoughts – thoughts that patients were unwilling or unable to reveal to their psychologists (Williams 1957). The idea is to use a less direct method to less obtrusively bring to surface the feelings and thoughts on the topic at hand. This study seeks to elicit the underlying motivations behind home choice decisions rather than focus on the physical attributes of a property. Hence, ZMET as a projective technique, is particularly suited to the collection and analysis of data for this research. This methodology also fits in with the recent increase in support for qualitative approaches in real estate research to allow for a closer observation and deeper understanding of the buying behaviour of home purchasers (Levy and Lee 2006).

The study

The respondents were twelve potential home buyers who were sourced from open homes by real estate agents, mortgage brokers and an advertisement placed in the Staff Bulletin at the University of Otago. This sample size is similar to that employed in past research using ZMET which has generally included samples of eight to sixteen respondents (Christensen and Olson 2002; Lee et
al. 2003; Vorell et al. 2003; Sease 2005). Moreover, while the sample size for this study was not determined in advance, a minimum of twelve interviews were planned in consultation with Professor Gerald Zaltman himself.

Two conditions were set to qualify home buyers as participants in this study: (1) the home buyer had to be looking to buy a home as a residence for themselves, that is, they were not buying a property as an investment; (2) the home buyer had to be looking to buy in the near future, that is, they were seriously considering purchasing a home. The first criterion was set to draw the distinction between home buyers and investors because investors may be motivated by different factors than are individuals buying a residential property. It also set the boundaries for the research and precluded investors' decision-making from the study. The second condition ensured that only genuine home buyers who were currently making home choice decisions were included in the study. This criterion was evaluated through a brief interview with participants to determine their goals for purchasing a home and their arrangements for financing the purchase.

Participants were asked to contact the researcher when they had placed an offer on a home or attended an auction for the purpose of bidding for a house. After placing an offer for a home, the respondents were then asked

Figure 1 Core steps in implementing ZMET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Storytelling. Participant describes the content of each picture they have taken or brought. The interviewer refrains from interpreting pictures during interview.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Missed Images. Participant describes the picture(s) that he/she was unable to obtain and explains their relevance. Missed pictures may have important relevance too.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Sorting Task. Participant sorts pictures into meaningful groups and provides a label or description for each pile. This helps to establish themes or constructs that are relevant to the participant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Construct Elicitation. A structured interview where basic constructs and their interconnections are elicited using images as stimuli. This involves a modified version of Kelly Repertory Grid technique and the laddering technique.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>The Most Representative Picture. Participant indicates which picture is most representative and gives reasons for the choice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Opposite Images. Descriptions are elicited of pictures that describe the opposite of the task.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>Sensory Images. Descriptions are elicited of what does and does not describe the concept in terms of colour, emotions, sound, smell, taste and touch. Sensory thoughts are images too and hence important to capture.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>Mental Map. Participant creates a map or causal model using the constructs that have been elicited.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 9</td>
<td>Summary Image. Participant creates a summary image or montage expressing the topic under study by using digital imaging.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 10</td>
<td>Consensus Map. Researcher creates a map or causal model involving the most important constructs from the interview transcripts.</td>
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Adapted from: Zaltman 1997
to take and/or collect eight to twelve photographs and/or pictures that represented their reasons for the choice of the house that they had chosen to purchase. The number of images (between eight and twelve) to be brought in by the participants was stipulated in ZMET, duplicated in past research (Catchings-Castello 2000; Christensen and Olson 2002; Lee et al. 2003; Sease 2005; Vorell et al. 2003) and confirmed through email communication with Zaltman. The photographs varied from respondent to respondent but many included nature-based images such as trees, water views, hills, mountains, lawns and flowers. Other photographs comprised family members, pets, buildings and items from their travel, just to name a few. These photographs were then used in an in-depth interview lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. During the interview, nine out of the ten core steps in implementing the ZMET procedure were followed. Figure 1 outlines these steps.

Step Ten is a data analysis stage that takes place after the interview. The data generated from Step Ten is too large to be incorporated in this paper and will be presented elsewhere. This paper focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of employing a projective technique such as ZMET for examining home choice behaviour.

Findings and discussion

The main finding from this study was the power of ZMET as a projective tool that enables consumers to express the deep-seated motives shaping their consumption behaviour. Each step of the ZMET interview was influential, some in more ways than others, in helping the respondents articulate the motivations for their home choice. Given the brevity constraints of this paper, only steps that stood out as highly instrumental will be detailed. Specifically, Step One was particularly helpful in uncovering motivations in the early stage of the interview. Step Two was important in ensuring that nothing was missed while Step Four helped respondents to further reflect on their motivations by asking them to find similarities and differences between their photographs. Step Six confirmed the underlying motivations and identified new motives by exploring factors that direct respondents away from a house. Finally, Step Nine showed that homebuyers themselves may not be aware of the factors that motivate them to their consumption choice, let alone be able to articulate these factors, without the assistance of a projective technique such as ZMET.

One of the strengths of the ZMET interview, which become evident during Step One, was the incorporation of laddering, a qualitative interview technique which uses a series of probes, mainly asking “why is that important to you?” (Thyne 2001). Within marketing, the laddering technique has already been used to identify the values that consumers consider important enough to influence their decision-making in a purchase choice situation (see for example Gutman 1997; Gutman 1982; Pieters et al. 1995; Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Laddering was applied throughout the. This was particularly useful during the Storytelling stage in which the interviewer focussed on the reasons why the images were selected, as well as the meanings behind each selected image. The following is an example of how the laddering technique was used during the interview to probe respondents to tell the story behind
R7 began the interview with a picture overlooking the Dunedin hills and bay.

I’ll start with this one. Cos that’s the main thing I was looking for. So that’s actually the views, it’s taken from the house… it’s like the view you have from the – the deck…that’s the main thing I was looking for.

When the question “Why is the view so important?” was raised, R7 replied,

I don’t know, when I wake up or when you – you know like when you’re – you’re in the house, I just like to breathe, like to have space and everything and – and if - you can have space in the house but if you don’t have space when you look outside the house it’s not as good.

When queried on the significance of having space, his response was,

I just don’t like to – to feel like, you know, you’re confined into that, you know, you’re trapped into a prison or something… I just need rooms that – that are made in a way that I don’t feel oppressed. I guess it also probably comes from my childhood or something, we always had space, I mean we always had big houses and stuff so uhm in Toroa (a University accommodation for international students) when I had that probably twelve square metre room I was feeling so bad.

The researcher prompted further by asking what he meant when he said that he always had space. The answer that came was quite revealing:

I don’t know, my bedroom (when he was growing up) was about twenty-two square metres… and I used to go on holidays – when I go to my grandparents, I mean they have a house that’s probably four hundred square metres… So you see it’s a – I don’t know – I just, you know, I’ve been brought up in space and stuff, so I guess now I just can’t go back.

From this example, one of the main findings to emerge from the Storytelling stage was that the use of pictures drew out important feelings and past experiences that influenced the homebuyers’ decisions.

Step Two of ZMET ensures that all of the motivations driving behaviour are explored and that respondents are not limited by their access to relevant images. After all of the pictures had been discussed in Step One, the researcher asked if there was any picture that the respondent had wanted to bring but could not find. Although many of the respondents did say that they managed to find all of the pictures that they wanted to represent their home choice, Step Two proved worthwhile in the case of R12. She admitted,

I thought about taking a photo of a map or something just to show – to sort of represent the location, cos I really like Mornington…

When prodded for more details, she continued,

I’ve lived there forever and maybe that comes back to a childhood thing…
When asked why buying a house in Mornington was important, she replied,

I grew up in Mornington... I live there now in my flat and now I'm just moving down the road so (yes).

This example reveals the importance of asking about missed images. It also depicts the strength of the laddering technique in uncovering motivations. Without further probing it would not have become evident that it was actually the respondents previous experiences driving their decision to purchase in a specific location. Although the respondent initially gave a very utilitarian attribute as the reason for their home purchase (location), the use of the laddering technique and talking about missed images lead to the discovery that it was actually past experiences that were driving this home purchase decision.

Step Four was another useful phase of the ZMET process because it helped to uncover deep motivations which might have otherwise been missed. This step is based on George Kelly (1955)'s Personal Construct Theory which posited that people try to understand the world by building internal representations called constructs about things. ZMET uses the Repertory Grid to discover constructs by considering what is similar and different about a target group. It is called a “grid” because a matrix is used with the objects under consideration on one side and the similarity and contrast poles along another side. A group of three is the minimum necessary to make such comparisons (two to find similarities and a third to note the differences). The following three pictures were randomly chosen for R3 during the interview.

From left to right, the first picture depicts an open-plan floor plan, the second is a nice kitchen while the third, a car to represent the garage that will accommodate the four cars R3 and her partner have between them. R3 chose the picture of the car as the odd one out. In the answer she provided, she said,

And they're different from the car because I suppose those ones there are more about entertaining and that's more entertaining people – that's (the picture of the car) more about entertaining yourself.
When asked why the facility to entertain people was an important attribute of the house, she replied,

I think I’ve – I’ve always wanted to uhm – when I was younger I always – uhm like when I was through high school and stuff I always had all my friends over every weekend. Like mum always opened doors to everyone and since I’ve gotten a bit older and everyone’s gone into flats and things it’s all – you know you go to their houses.

Upon further prompting, she continued,

And so since I’m still living at home I missed out on having all the people around and I want that back. I want people to come to my house and not have to always go to theirs.

Therefore, one of the findings related to the ZMET method is that the Construct Elicitation stage is a powerful step towards uncovering deep motives through pictures. Should this stage be missed, this construct of entertainment would not have been discovered.

One of the criteria for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research is negative case analysis (Carson et al. 2001). This involves asking questions to find exceptions to a rule in a theory that therefore invalidates the rule. Step Six of the ZMET interview fulfils this criterion because it posits that while it is imperative to understand what homebuyers are attracted to, it is also important to identify what deters an individual from a property. At this juncture, respondents were asked to think about and describe a picture that would not reflect their home choice. For R11, this exercise proved worthwhile because it surfaced another important construct. The image that she conjured was that of

a Japanese house in the middle, in the crowd of middle of several other house (Note: this respondent is not an English native speaker).

With further queries, more was revealed – that the reason they bought the house they did was their neighbours were not too close to them:

They are not too close and we don’t have any neighbours in front because we have a bush here. So it was the other thing we like not to have close neighbours.

The findings revealed once again that ZMET has encouraged the respondents to talk freely about factors influencing their choices. By asking the participants to talk about what is not meaningful to them, it broadened and confirmed other constructs that were important to them.

The findings thus far suggest that ZMET as a projective technique was powerful in bringing unconscious thought to a level of awareness at which verbal articulation occurred. This was particularly evident in Step Nine where respondents created a montage or summary image of the reasons that drove them to their home choices. The purpose for this step was to help the respondent reflect and gain insight into their thought processes. When their pictures and photographs were brought up on a computer screen, the respondent constructed their montage. During the process they made
editing decisions such as cropping, resizing and colouring. As respondents described the inclusion of each image and the relevance of each editing decision, insights could be drawn. For example, when asked why she chose to separate the two images of mountains in her summary image, respondent R1 explained,

So it’s on top of the foundations, on top of the Moeraki Boulders, but in the construction site still … so not all the way on top. Cos it … just signifies the steps to success, so they’re slow and they’re hard and they’re…at the bottom like I can see them, you know, I … can see how I can get up there…But once I’m at the top, see and this is where the wine comes above that mountain, I can enjoy it and I can relax…

The construction site is a metaphor for a house needing much work while the mountains in question are symbolic of the hard work that she will need to put in. She likened the completion of the renovation work to being at the top of the mountain hence the picture of the mountain was strategically placed at the top. Then, a picture of a wine bottle and glass was deliberately placed above the picture of the mountain. This is representative of enjoyment and relaxation, in her own words. In R1’s case, her response reflected a summary of a multitude of constructs elicited throughout the interview, although sometimes new constructs were elicited at this stage. Appendix 1 depicts R1’s summary image.

Step Nine gave the respondents an opportunity to summarise the whole interview in their own terms – each summary image is a master image which reflects an aggregate view of one respondent’s primary feelings about his or her home choice. During this part of the process, many of the respondents were amazed at the new insights that they gained into their home buying process, insights that they were not aware of before the interview. The new discoveries made by respondents during this stage suggest that the creation of the summary image was most valuable at uncovering unconscious motives underlying consumer home choice. Consumer research has shown that the reasons for purchase are not always apparent because when first asked why they purchased a product, consumers naturally answer in stereotypical, automatic, and often superficial ways. These responses sound right to the consumer but they reveal little about the reasons for the purchase. These responses more often than not describe attributes of the product, but quick responses only scratch at the surface and are often not the real reasons for purchasing a product. This is because consumers are often not even aware of these reasons. At the end of the interview, a few respondents expressed astonishment and satisfaction at how their overall feelings about their home choices came into sharper focus at the sight of their digitized master image.

In summary, each step of ZMET assisted with bringing new information to light through the incorporation of other qualitative techniques such as photography, laddering and the Kelly Repertory Grid. This study has shown that ZMET is powerful in increasing the likelihood of uncovering important but previously unconsidered motivations underlying consumer home choice.
Implications for methodology

The literature review outlined a number of limitations of housing research conducted from a positivist paradigm. The major concern was the absence of the consumer’s own voice which in turn resulted in a loss of understanding of consumer home choices. It also highlighted the need to adopt approaches other than stated and revealed preferences. In addition, there were issues related to the ranking and rating of attributes in questionnaires that neglect important contextual and situational elements.

This study has distanced itself from using hypothetical choice, the revealed preference approach and the quantitative method of ranking and rating attributes. Instead, it sought to understand consumer home choice by utilising a humanistic approach to gain access to the homebuyer’s own voice. Conducting this research on actual homebuyers created value by providing access to the lived reality of individuals. Each homebuyer was interviewed immediately after placing an offer on a home or attending an auction. This ensured that the respondents were interviewed about their recent experiences and overcame the limitations of memory that are inherent in retrospective studies. Moving away from the practices of past housing research that used the stated and revealed preference approach was a key component of data generation for this study. It provided a means for discovering an unknown phenomenon (motivation underlying consumer home choice) by helping to identify key factors that were previously obscure or unexplained. The research findings allow a fresh and non-stereotypical look at why people buy the homes they do and offer insight into the key motives that underlie a homebuyer’s choice. The research design for this study therefore holds significant insights for guiding future methodology.

From a method point of view, the use of the respondents’ photographs within ZMET as a projective technique proved to be particularly valuable in engaging the respondents to begin talking about the reasons, be they conscious or unconscious, for their home choice. The photographs provided a unique way for respondents to communicate the dimensions of their lives, and their choices. More importantly, using photographs taken by the respondents themselves added depth to the research because the data was a ‘more true’ reflection of constructs important to the homebuyers. This contrasts greatly from the tendency of past researchers to employ researcher-generated constructs in surveys and questionnaires where the voice of the consumers is not captured. By combining nonverbal images with verbal communication, the insights gained from this study are argued to better resemble consumers’ thoughts, emotions and behaviour toward their choices. The discussion of the limitations of past research examining home choice behaviour draws attention to the issues associated with the quantitative approaches of revealed and stated preferences. Moreover, the present findings suggest that projective techniques such as ZMET may be more appropriate to fully appreciate and understand the consumer’s voice in any given real estate issue.
Conclusion

This study trialled an innovative methodology for examining consumer home choice. The utilisation of photographs in this projective technique was helpful because it facilitated the exploration of the homebuyers' internal construction of their choices. The photographs, coupled with the laddering technique, triggered thoughts in the respondents and elicited meanings that otherwise might have been dormant in a face-to-face interview, providing insights on consumer motivation from the consumer’s point of view. In short, the employment of ZMET proved to be pivotal in extracting some very deep-seated meanings from the homebuyers that they did not know themselves prior to the interview.

This study has also addressed the recent call for researchers to understand the behaviour of real estate decision makers from a consumer marketing perspective (D’Arcy and Kaleva 2003; Levy et al. 2008; Winstanley et al. 2003) and to “examine the human influences that real estate consumers have on real estate demand” (Gibler and Nelson 2003, p. 63). As already mentioned, research into real estate has traditionally taken a positivist and quantitative approach. By employing a qualitative and interpretive methodology, the use of a qualitative projective approach in the present study overcomes many of the limitations of past research and demonstrated the strength of such an approach for understanding consumer behaviour in real estate.

References


Appendix 1 Summary of image: respondent

**Appendix 1: Summary Image: Respondent 1**

**Summary**: The boulders were deliberately placed at the bottom to represent the solid foundation that the house has. The construction site represents all the work that the property needs before it can become habitable. The picture of the old man shows that the house is indeed old but it has character. The picture of the mountain above the rocks signifies that the project will be hard work, similar to that of mountain climbing. However, at the end of the project, a reward will be waiting hence the wine bottle and glass. It is at the top of the mountain (the completion of the renovation work) that this respondent will be able to enjoy the views (represented by all the photos at the top) and relax.
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