

For marketers or for scholars?

Marketing-focused ethnographic research offers companies deep insights about consumers' motives, values, attitudes, beliefs and behavior that can be crucial at any stage of the marketing process - from product creation to campaign evaluation and reinvention. Without a doubt, this kind of understanding is essential. Products and services that don't click with consumers in relevant ways are destined to fail. Since marketing nowadays is so consumer-oriented (as opposed to product-oriented) ethnography has rightly become more popular in marketing research.

Ethnography has its roots in social and cultural anthropology and there are many traditionalists who feel that the only "real" ethnographies are those conducted by scholarly ethnographers. While the ethnographic projects conducted in the name of marketing share some similarities to those done for anthropological purposes, there are distinct differences. Marketers who conduct ethnographic projects may never earn the full respect of those in the academic world but as we will see they can benefit from applying to their own projects some of the procedural rigor that characterizes academic ethnographies.

Untapped needs

Some of the most common applications of ethnography in consumer research include new product and concept development. For example, by discovering untapped consumer needs or unexpected uses of the product, marketers might develop a new product line or a more effective positioning for an existing product. Also, by understanding consumer evaluation and use of products and spaces, retail performance might be maximized (lights, signs, location, etc.). Another application is the study of ethnic or other sub-cultural groups, to create, for example, consumer categories and prepare strategies based on those segments.

Furthermore, ethnography can help researchers understand the process of decision-making: Why do consumers buy this product and not a competing one? What are the factors influencing the

Both camps can lay claim to, benefit from, ethnographic studies



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decision? How is the negotiation with family or group members and the self?

Understand the experience

Ethnography intends to understand the human experience in an inductive and holistic way. As part of the naturalistic inquiry tradition, ethnographic research takes place in real-world settings, without manipulation of the subject under study.

In contrast to the hypothetical-deductive approach of quantitative research, ethnographies do not require the specification of main variables or the statement of a specific hypothesis to be tested. In ethnographic research, the inductive analysis allows the analysis dimensions to emerge from consumer behavioral patterns. Then, theoretical frameworks about what is happening in the particular context are grounded in field experience rather than imposed a priori.

From the purist point of view of a traditional anthropologist, ethnographic marketing research does not always follow this principle in a rigorous way. When marketers conduct ethnographic research, they might already have clear ideas about the dimensions of the phenomena they need to understand. For example, the objectives of their clients or the type of product under consideration create dimensions and categories that affect the research a priori.

Another principle of the anthropological tradition is the role of the researcher. This is the degree to which the researcher is a research instrument and how involved the researcher is in the community or group under study. There is a continuum between complete submersion in the group that is being studied (“going native”) and objectively observing it. Any point of the continuum is accepted and implemented by anthropologists and marketers alike.

However, traditional ethnographers would attack marketing ethnographers because of the short

time they spend in the field.

Traditional ethnography requires studying the subject for an extended period of time. Marketers, on the other hand, usually conduct shorter ethnographies due to the nature of the project and external deadlines.

Purist ethnographers might complain that marketing ethnographies are snapshots rather than stories, contradicting the thickly descriptive nature of ethnography. On the other hand, given all the time and space constraints, marketing ethnographers have to quickly develop a sharp and intelligent way of capturing, analyzing and interpreting behavior. Marketing ethnographers also have the opportunity to participate in more studies, all diverse, during their careers. One could wonder: Do we learn more about consumer behavior in a three-year study with a single group or topic than in multiple studies with different segments in the same time period?

Emic vs. etic

Another important aspect of ethnography is the distinction of emic vs. etic perspectives. The emic perspective refers to the understanding and classification of the phenomena based on the language and indigenous categories used by the people under study. On the other hand, the etic perspective refers to the theoretical categories created by the anthropologist or marketing researcher.

Purist ethnographers would argue that only emic categories should be used, because they are truthful to the group being studied. However, some other researchers accept that it is also important to convey the comparative, interpreted cultural significance of the emic perspective by using categories that are familiar to the audience. This is particularly important in marketing research, as the final reader of the research report is frequently a client who expects technical terminology. In my opinion, a combination of both

perspectives is the best approach. Indigenous categories should be compared and contrasted with theoretical categories.

Ethnographic research is a very powerful research approach for studying ethnic or sub-cultural consumer behavior. For example, it allows researchers to segment markets based on how culture impacts the choice and use of a product/service under observation. Naturalistic research allows for an understanding of the cultural dimension of product usage, for example the rituals of personal hygiene and grooming, the roles of the different members in the family and how those roles affect decision-making.

Understanding the design

An exploration and understanding of the different aspects of the ethnographic research design in academia certainly has benefits for marketing researchers. The first step is the literature review. The review of the academic and trade literature, as in any other research approach, helps to understand how culture as a moderating factor of consumer behavior has been studied. Moreover, in ethnographic research the literature is reviewed continuously, as interplay between data collection, data analysis and review of the literature is ongoing.

As the researcher analyzes the data, he or she might start finding cultural aspects that shape consumer behavior that were not considered initially. This might lead to further data collection.

In terms of the unit of analysis, the holistic approach encourages the researcher to observe the context in which individuals and groups live, even if the research focuses on the individual. This includes considering the social and cultural groups in which individuals live, the interactions with members of the same or other cultural groups and the type of events that take place.

In general, ethnography uses a

purposeful sampling. This means that key informants and information-rich cases are selected because one can learn from them issues of importance to the study. For example, if the object of the study includes understanding differences among unacculturated Hispanics, acculturated Hispanics and Hispanics in the process of acculturation, the selection of key cases representing these groups should bring to light cultural differences. This heterogeneity of the sample is crucial in cross-cultural research.

In terms of data collection methods, observations and in-depth interviews capture participants' experience of the world, from his or her own perspectives. Observations take place in naturalistic settings. The researcher might capture the importance of cultural objects or symbols that construct the surroundings of the individual or group under study. These objects and spaces might be manifestations of internalized cultural norms, values and beliefs. For example, the researcher might capture the importance of tradition in a Hispanic family if he/she observes a Hispanic child wearing traditional fabric diapers instead of the modern diapers worn by children in the U.S. Other more obvious examples would be the observation of Catholic images (or the lack of them) decorating a Hispanic house.

Ethnographic observations also focus on rituals. These repeated norms of behavior also convey cultural practices and uses of imagery. One example of this is the ritual of a typical Italian dinner, with the mother serving everybody seated at the table, bringing one dish after the other according to the traditional order.

Cultural characteristics of consumer behavior might also emerge when analyzing roles. Examining the relationships among members of the group or family can aid in understanding the nature of opinion leadership, communication in social networks, and the decision-

making process. Do fathers have different roles in purchase decision-making across different cultural groups? Is the father-child relationship based on respect and hierarchy? Is the youngest child the one who decides what is for dinner? These are the kind of questions that ethnographic observations might answer.

Ethnographers might also observe behavior in practical activities like shopping or eating. In these activities, cultural patterns of consumer behavior emerge. Are Latino women going shopping together? Are there any indicators that they enjoy shopping as a social experience?

The observation of verbal and non-verbal communication such as proxemics, body language, dressing codes and so on helps to decipher cultural codes.

In-depth interviews

Focused observations grasp the unconscious, spontaneous behaviors in real-time, overcoming the limitation of participants' difficulty in recalling their own behaviors. But observations might have some limitations when it comes to understanding emotions, feelings and internal needs. Here, in-depth interviews come to play.

In-depth interviews are used to better understand the internalization of cultural values and beliefs as verbalized by the participants. Answers, in the form of narratives, might reveal cultural values, archetypes and imagery central to the nature of the culture. Interviews also help to probe and clarify.

Traditional ethnographic interviews take several hours. Traditional ethnographic observations might take several years. As discussed before, the nature of marketing research doesn't allow for this kind of depth. Due to this, cross-cultural researchers need to be culturally sensitive enough to focus on the key aspects that yield deep insights in the most time-effective way.

The cultural sensitivity of the

researcher is also important when it comes to analyzing and interpreting the data, and finally reporting the results. Understanding cultural dimensions and orientations helps the researcher overcome the challenge of interpreting the bulk of information gathered in a synthetic and creative way.

The process of making sense of the data, from a cultural perspective, mainly depends on the researcher. The researcher, therefore, becomes the main research tool. Translating raw data into theoretical models, translating the essence of what the data revealed and offering relevant managerial implications are the main challenges of marketing ethnographic research.

No need to go native

Marketers don't need to "go native" and spend three years in the field in order to understand the meaning of a particular product to a certain sub-cultural group. However, marketers do need to show that the research design, data collection and analysis are rigorous and systematic.

Also, it is very important that the data be high-quality, credible, rich and representative. The analytical process by which data is analyzed into themes and categories needs to be clear and consistent as well.

While it's unlikely those in the academic world will ever confer full legitimacy upon marketing-related ethnographies, scholars need to allow and encourage novel researchers and students to conduct as much ethnography as possible so that they can acquire the needed experience. More continuous collaboration between scholars and practitioners will certainly benefit both groups. By understanding more about the other's perspective, perhaps scholars and marketers can mutually benefit and, in sharing knowledge, raise the quality of all ethnographic efforts. | Q