Applying Systematic Combining Using Abductive Logic to Video-Ethnography

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This paper described how researchers applied systematic combining using abductive logic, to create a video-ethnography that explored sustained celebrity worship/fandom within a micro-community. Researchers employed an iterative non-linear process in which they moved from the literature, to interview transcripts to the visual and/or audio data, and back to the field (not necessarily in that order) to shape their understanding. In adopting this exhaustive approach they strove to increase the veracity and richness of their findings. They concluded that prolonged analysis of audio and/or visual recordings featuring informants likely reduced their objectivity due to a tendency to unconsciously engage in empathetic identification.

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SEEING IS BELIEVING? VISUAL DATA AND REPRESENTATION IN CONSUMER RESEARCH.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes issues encountered by researchers when applying an approach to video-ethnography that anecdotal reports suggest is widely used yet seldom explicitly recognised; namely “systematic combining” using abductive logic (Dubois and Gadde 2002). In applying this approach, researchers sampled, collected, and analysed data in an iterative non-linear process in which they moved from the literature, to the data and back to the field (not necessarily in that order) to validate, expand upon or refute their emergent understanding. The video-ethnography explored the following question: “Which factors contribute to sustained celebrity worship/fandom within a micro-community?” The research setting was the Sydney division of the Australian Sir Cliff Richard Fan Club, members of which have been fans since teenage-hood and who are typically over 50 years of age. The research culminated in the identification of several explanatory themes including: 1] pre and early adult socialisation, 2] celebrity narcissism, 3] sexualised para-social relationship, 4] moderate psychopathology, 5] congruence between ideal self and celebrity-image, 6] religiosity, 7] brand community, and 8] music preference.

To address the research question researchers collected a large volume of print and filmic, written, visual and/or audio data. Auto-driving during long interviews and focus groups conducted in informants’ homes resulted in presentation and discussion by informants of this material from different origins reflecting multiple aspects of the celebrity and their fandom over time. Cliff Richard’s management was a source of feature length films, music video clips, posters, photographs, picture books, and commemorative items such as decorative plates and T-shirts. From the popular media came newspaper and magazine stories, books about the celebrity, television reports, interviews and documentaries about Cliff Richard. Fans shot personal photos and amateur videocassettes documenting their experiences as fans and in some cases generated home-made Cliff memorabilia such as bookmarks, Christmas cards and clocks. Another rich source of data originated was extensive video footage of in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted in informants’ homes by the researchers. They therefore captured informants’ self-reports (transcribed in full) as well as their non-verbal behaviour such as gestures, facial expression, grooming, clothing, social interaction and physical surroundings.

Over nine months researchers analysed the data to generate the explanatory themes. They generated explanatory themes by moving freely in tandem between the literature, written, verbal, visual and/or audio data and in some cases expert informant advice. For example researchers concluded that celebrity narcissism might be an important concept worthy of future exploration after engaging in process described below. They read the following in a focus group transcript: “Cliff loves himself. We know that. Whenever we meet, he congratulates us on our great taste.” Referring to the relevant video-tape footage the researchers observed extended laughter by focus group members after this comment. These observations prompted the researchers to examine theories of narcissism (American Psychiatric Association 1994), which detailed markers of the personality type, such as vanity, self-absorption, excessive pride, and lack of empathy, that became a guide for subsequent data analysis. Vanity was suggested by images suggesting Cliff’s obsession with maintaining a youthful appearance via cosmetic surgery, dying his hair dark brown despite being 64 years of age and wearing brightly coloured figure hugging clothes to draw attention to his slim physique. The researchers returned to the transcripts and found several comments by informants suggesting Cliff was constantly on a weight reduction diet: “He only ever eats once a day.” In Cliff’s television interviews, self absorption, intense pride in his achievements and arrogance are clearly evident in his demeanour. Cliff’s reported lack of success in his romantic life and his dislike of physical contact with others, exemplified the narcissistic traits of avoiding intimacy, love, and attachment (American Psychiatric Association 1994). Finally Cliff’s career of over approximately 50 years attests to his quest for “narcissistic supply,” that is, a seemingly endless need for adoration by others (Horowitz 1975). A documentary about Cliff’s early life reinforces this point; as he appears before thousands of squealing fans a voice-over states that “for Cliff his fan’s are everything.” To further validate these findings researchers consulted an expert in narcissism who suggested the likelihood of Cliff’s having Acquired Situational Narcissism, a proposed form of narcissism which develops in adolescence or adulthood, brought on by wealth, fame and the other trappings.

In applying systematic combining, the researchers attempted to reduce the probability that their preconceived ideas would inhibit collection of useful data and detection of unanticipated patterns or obscuring reality by forcing data into in-appropriate categories. Hence they implicitly acknowledged that their beliefs would not always remain constant during the research project; being revised through encountering concrete examples likely to drive conceptual shifts in proving, refuting and enhancing emergent theory. However, the researchers noted that approaching research in this way when a wide range of different data types are in play requires substantially more time and effort than other
The use of visuals in ethnographic consumer research is well-documented (e.g. Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003), in which they are commonly used to complement ethnographic interviews. However, integrating the visual and the textual is not without challenges. The issues are described in a study of Christian music performed at a charismatic church in Sydney (Hillsong).

This study analyses the meanings of these praise and worship songs and how this discourse intersects the sacred and cultural constructions of the self. The project started with an analysis of the lyrics, but it was realised that inclusion of the physical performance environment was also vital to the analysis. The importance of the spaces between text and audience, consumption and production were found to result in a multi-layered interpretation of this form of religious expression. Music as an expression of worship has a visual representation in the context and way it is played and performed by producers and audience. This differs by religious institution and ranges from traditional hymns to Gospel music, to contemporary praise and worship, to Christian rock. Music style is not neutral, but is organically wed to the socio-cultural setting in which the music is created. This produces an assortment of representations and discourses which requires a marriage of visual, audio, and textual research.

A cross section of Hillsong music dating from 1990 – 2005 was selected. I initially used discourse analysis to study the lyrics and explore the meaning expressed through the language of the songs. The objective was to gain insight into the institutional values behind the message. The visual materials included pictures of the music performance, the congregation, the architectural space, images of the people (audience, song performers, and church leaders), pictures of artefacts produced by the church, and video recordings of services and related events proved vital to developing richer understandings.

The theology, values and rituals of the church is grounded in beliefs of success, blessings, and prosperity in the present. They blend traditional biblical doctrines with secular values of individualism, materialism, and commercial success. The visual display of the music performance mimics that of a rock concert. The congregation’s expressions are euphoric. Actions include clapping, jumping, dancing to the beat, often with eyes closed or hands up in the air. The performance style of the music contrasts with the solemn image of traditional church hymns. The architectural space of the church has a corporate appearance with convention-style seating. The church building is modern and traditional Christian icons are absent (e.g. cross, wooden pews, pipe organ, and statues). The church is equipped with the latest technology in terms of sound systems and flat plasma screens onto which the music lyrics are projected. All of this gives the appearance of an commercial entertainment centre. This setting provides the context in which the music is both “seen” and “heard” by the audience. Artefacts produced by the church include brochures for it’s various events and conferences, and a multiplicity of items that are on sale such as mugs, T-shirts, books, and videos. The website also provides visual material with images of people always happy, young, energetic, enthusiastic, and hip.

This visual material amplifies the self-empowering messages in the lyrics. The emphasis is very much on “I” rather than “we.” This is opposite to traditional church music where the “I” is deemphasised in deference to god. The self-empowering, self-liberating, and self-satisfying values embedded in the music is congruent with Inglehart’s (1975) post-materialist values (emphasising self-expression and quality of life) which characterises post-industrialised societies such as Australia. This study illustrates how discourses are articulated through an assortment of visual and textual representations. Consequently, meanings must be decoded from holistic combinations of sensory stimuli.

REFERENCES


