Special Session Summary  Interpretive Research: Lessons From the Field and a Report From the World of Practice

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The session is organized around the practice of interpretive research and its application to real world issues.

The first objective is to share the knowledge and experiences of three well-trained anthropologists and interpretivists who have been using qualitative research methods in the field. In the past twenty years or so, academic consumer research has witnessed a proliferation of methods and research tools and ontologies that derive from an interpretivist orientation. These tools are now being put into practice with some interesting results, sometimes encouraging and other times less so. The questions that this session poses are: What are the factors that account for the successful use of qualitative techniques in world of practice? What are the challenges that go with it? What lessons can be drawn from the field and where do we go from here? In one sense the session is aimed as a report to the world of academics who may not have such a direct or sustained experience in applying their methods to advance their research knowledge and an opportunity for them to reflect on the impact of their work on the social world.

The second objective is, as consumer technologies proliferate and consumers are confronted with the latest technological gadgets, to develop a profound understanding of these technologies in the domain of popular culture, locally and globally. The presenters focus on the use of interpretive research as they try to unravel consumer experiences relative to technology adoption and consumption.

There are several ways to describe what this session is all about. At one level it is a feedback to the academic world. At another level, it is a way to bridge the gap between theory and practice. At a more technical level, it can be described as praxis, as the integration of theory and practice, and a deep understanding of the complexity of social interactions in society. The process of praxis allows reflection on reality, with mutual understanding evolving from dialog, which in turn is aimed at eliminating the dichotomy between theory and practice. Praxis is always action and reflection: they occur simultaneously. It is this dialectical relationship that offers the possibility of resolving the conflicts that often arise between critical theorizing and action.

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

The first paper uses a combination of ethnography and semiotic analyses in technology advertising. As the authors state succinctly, “in this paper, we consider both the substance and the boundaries of technology as a symbolic construct through the semiotic analysis of different sets of advertising.” The paper concludes with the practical implications of their work and the impact of their analyses on marketing practice.

The second paper focuses on meanings of technology in cross-cultural settings. The author uses the term, “translocal,” to problematize how global diasporas and the continuous movement of people and ideas around the world call into question the association of culture with place. To quote the authors, “this paper draws on an example from international market research to show how local, global and translocal interpretations of technological innovation shape effective communications with brand managers.”

The third paper raises the broader issue of how ethnographic methods are becoming part of corporate marketing research in large corporations such as H-P, Whirlpool, 3M and J.C.Penney, and yet create some challenges for anthropological research. Thus the issue raised in the paper in the words of the author is, “For the most part, ethnography has gained acceptance as a research method, but it is not usually accompanied by the philosophy or holistic approach which is a hallmark of anthropological inquiry.” The author provides some deep insights into this anthropological tension in the practice of consumer research.

“From Door Knobs to Cars: Semiotics of Technology in Advertising”
Rita Denny, Practica Group, LLC
Patricia Sunderland, Practica Group, LLC

In the last decade, ethnography has become almost standard practice in applied marketing research. For anthropologists in marketing, ethnography is grounded in cultural analysis. The traditional anthropological method used to illuminate cultural categories, cultural domains and cultural practices, ethnography in applied marketing has been a way for brand managers or agency planners to reconstrue and rethink marketing problems-- whether branding, new positioning or new product development. This paper extends the scope of cultural analysis from ethnography to semiotics as an additional venue for re-thinking consumers and consumption.

Semiotic analysis is not new to the academic advertising (Bignell, 1997; Cook, 1992; Goldman, 1992; Mick 1997) and market research communities (Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman, 2001; Larsen, Mick & Alsted, 1991; Mick, 1986; Nadin Tanaka, 1994; Umiker-Sebeok 1987) or even popular culture (New Yorker, 2001). Nonetheless, semiotics is not common practice in applied marketing research in the U.S. Indeed, in part because ethnography itself is all too often applied as a method rather than form of (cultural) analysis (Sunderland and Denny, 2003), semiotic analysis can seem jargon-laden (see Mick, 1997) and too far afield of brand managers’ practical needs.

While semiotic analyses can and do reflect a spectrum of theoretical perspectives brought to bear in the analysis–including psychological, linguistic, folklore, literary–our vantage point is a cultural one. Semiotics in anthropology has a rich tradition in which texts produced by the culture are a focus for illuminating symbolic and cultural meanings (see Barthes, 1972; Daniel, 1984; Goffman, 1979; Handler and Segal, 1990; Lutz and Collins, 1993; Martin 1987, 1994; Mertz and Parmentier, 1985).

This paper explores the utility of semiotic analysis in applied marketing. It does so through the lens of technology, in which we treat technology as a cultural construct of today’s world. Technology is a preoccupation of popular culture, lived and experienced today through computers, cell phones, the internet, broadband or digital imaging. In the living, technology has become a symbolic arena for re-constructing how we see ourselves (Turkle, 1984, 1995, 1997) and our spaces (Denny and Sunderland, in press; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Venkatesh, 1998; Venkatesh et al. 2001). As both a practical and symbolic construct, technology has been studied ethnographically. In this paper we consider both the substance and the boundaries of technology as a symbolic construct through the semiotic analysis of different sets of advertising. Our goal is to illuminate culture through advertising and, in the end, to demonstrate how semiotics offers a new way of thinking for brand managers or agency planners. More specifically, we explore 3 case examples:
The boundaries of technology and nature: Car ads in New Zealand
The boundaries of technology and art: Faucets and fixtures advertising in the U.S.
The boundaries of technology and biology: Skincare advertising in the U.S.

In each case we illustrate how technology, as a symbolic or cultural category, is nuanced through the analysis of advertising and, in each case, how technology lives and is in tension with other cultural realms. Finally, we discuss how each analysis was used by clients to re-think their marketing dilemmas.

“Local and Translocal Meanings of Technology—When Does It Matter?”
Maryann McCabe, Cultural Connections

Applied consumer research has passed the threshold of learning to cross cultural boundaries. Global brand managers are savvy enough to know that successful marketing requires positioning products/services within the context of local meaning (Mazzarella 2003). Marketing skill to position in foreign countries stems from a cultural understanding of a particular place which ethnography has often provided (Watson 1997). However, global diasporas and the continuing movement of people and ideas call into question the association of culture with place. Translocal solidarities defy the culture/place connection (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). This paper applies recent ethnographic knowledge of people living in different domains of meaning (a translocal domain and the domain of meaning in a host culture) to consumer commerce because learning to translate from one domain to the other offers brand managers opportunity to identify the sphere critical for successful communication with consumers.

Grasping multiple domains of meaning is key to developing communication strategy for many markets. Yet, it seems hardest to do when the market involves one’s own culture. This is especially the case for positioning and communication focusing on technological innovation. There are two reasons for this difficulty. One is that when studying behavior in one’s own society, one is quickly prone to assume the meaning of what people say and do. The analytic problem created here is that the assumed meaning may or may not reflect the subjective meaning of the other’s behavior. The other reason is that technological innovation is a potent and multivocal symbol with contested meanings (Turner 1967). What may not be readily apparent is that customers can interpret a symbolic construct like technological innovation from different domains of meaning. Which domain is key to communications strategy? Because knowledge is situated (Said 1978), it is important to interpret all domains and pinpoint the key operative one in order to connect with customers at the most powerful emotional level. To talk from the ‘wrong’ domain would be talking past the customer (Ortner 1999).

This paper draws on an example from international market research to show how local, global and translocal interpretations of technological innovation shape effective communications. Customers live in several realities when it comes to thinking about technological innovation. These realities pertain to collective and personal identities (Foster 1999), or national and workplace cultures—or, a translocal culture.

The purpose of sharing the example is to demonstrate the separation of culture and place and the need for understanding separate domains of meaning when a target is part of a culture not joined by place. Managers may work for different entities (corporations, professional firms, etc.), but they form a translocal culture in that they have a common professional identity. Translocality raises the issue of imagined communities of belonging that cut across geographic boundaries (Anderson 1983, Appadurai 1996, Inda and Rosaldo 2002). Thus, this paper brings to light the existence of and tension between different domains of meaning (local/global/translocal) motivating behavior within groups defined by either an imagined or geographically situated sense of community. The implications for brand managers, if we think of them as managers of symbolic meaning, is to determine what part of customer identity drives consumption.

“What’s Anthropological about Corporate Ethnography? Lessons from the Field”
Norman Stolzoff, Ethnographic Insight, Inc.

This paper explores the challenges and successes of incorporating ethnographic methods and the broader anthropological mindset into the consumer research context. These reflections are based on lessons I have gained after more than five years experience conducting ethnographic research for the high-tech industry with companies such as H-P, Whirlpool, 3M, and JCPenney.

The paper focuses on the cultural divide that separates the academic and corporate approaches to ethnography, and seeks to understand what has been gained and/or lost in the relatively rapid adoption of ethnography for market research ends. That is, what are the challenges of adapting ethnography to fit corporate time-tables, budget constraints, and familiar market research customs?

While there has been a general openness to new methodologies in the market research world over the last few years (such as rapid growth of online surveys and ethnography), it’s much more difficult to have an impact on the fundamental research process, the overall way that companies think and utilize research. In fact, there is very little understanding within companies of the role of market research in the enterprise and much less about the introduction of these new methodologies.

For the most part, ethnography has gained acceptance as a research method, but it is not usually accompanied by the philosophic or holistic approach which is a hallmark of anthropological inquiry. In too many cases, ethnography is new wine in old bottles. While companies yearn for fresh ways of getting beyond focus groups and other consumer research methods, they often demand that ethnography not challenge their comfort zone. For example, they demand that ethnography be “staged” in a manner they are familiar with such that they all but resemble the focus groups they are trying to get beyond. Frequently, the looser qualities of ethnography (such as participant observation), which are in fact its core strengths, are all but eliminated in the name of convenience and control.

In conclusion, the paper argues that a more full-bodied anthropological approach to ethnography would serve companies with more of the consumer insights they so desperately need.