Methodological Challenges in Assessing the Food Marketing Environment of Target Segments

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“Obesogenic” environments that encourage excess consumption of food and/or discourage physical activity have been implicated as a contributing factor to obesity. In the United States, although obesity is population wide, it is not equally distributed among socio-demographic groups. This presentation will discuss conceptual and methodological challenges related to assessing the marketing environments of specific consumer segments. We will draw from several projects related to an on-going community based social marketing research program. We integrate insights across projects to propose specific research strategies. We describe how future research on the “street-level” contexts of target segments, including the marketing environment, can support consumer research that generates practical solutions to contribute to the positive transformation of communities.

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**SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY**

Taking It to the Streets: Methodological Challenges of Doing Transformative Consumer Research on Health

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**SESSION OVERVIEW**

A long tradition exists of bringing the expertise of consumer researchers to pressing social problems, such as Alan Andreasen’s (1975) classic work on the disadvantage consumer. Transformative consumer researchers are developing a multi-paradigmatic program of research that directly engages different stakeholders to help solve social problems and increase consumer well being. Consumer researchers stand in a unique position as informed brokers between the interests of business, consumers, and policy makers. Like other social scientists, we employ rigorous methods and theories and seek to alleviate social problems. Unlike other social scientists, our constituency is consumers, our domain is consumption, and we have a sophisticated grasp of businesses, their strategies, and techniques. Increasingly, the great social problems of our time, such as improving health, are tied to the practices of both businesses and consumers. This ability to converse intelligently with these different stakeholders gives us the potential to broker sustainable change. Nevertheless, practical challenges emerge when doing transformative research.

This special session brings together consumer researchers who are all engaged in programmatic research that examines health problems but employ different methods. Sonya Grier and Shiriki Kumanyika discuss findings from an on-going program of community-based social marketing. Their research examines marketing as a contextual factor on food practices and obesity among African-Americans (Grier and Kumanyika 2008; Grier et al. 2007). In their presentation, they discuss conceptual and methodological challenges related to assessing the marketing environments of African Americans, which occurs at a confluence of interests and generates significant media interest. Craig Andrews, Scot Burton, and Rick Netemeyer examine the effects of a statewide, anti-smoking media campaign on adolescents (Andrews et al. 2004) and adults (Netemeyer, Andrews, and Burton 2005) using telephone interviews. This study was taken to scale in this statewide effort that involved negotiations with researchers from public health and marketing and political decision makers, which had both positive and negative impacts on the research. Laurie Anderson and Julie Ozanne employ a community health approach to examine the health beliefs and cultural practices in a Mexican-American and Native-American town where diabetes rates are 23%. Engaging community members to participate in a research project required tremendous flexibility and time. A series of methods were employed as the project continued including participant observation, interviews, photography, and action methods (Anderson 2007; Ozanne & Saatcioglu 2008).

This session highlights that despite employing different methods, these field projects all examine complex social problems that invariably involve methodological ingenuity, complex trade-offs, and intricate negotiations among various stakeholders. These researchers bring insights from their field work to explore the construction of transformative knowledge that inescapably emerges within a web of social and political interests. While these researchers study health issues from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, a common set of issues and questions emerges in their field work, which offers a platform from which we can debate the challenges and opportunities of doing research aimed at improving consumer well being. This session would be relevant to researchers interested in transformative consumer research, health care, social marketing, and at-risk consumer segments.

**EXTENDED ABSTRACTS**

“Methodological Challenges in Assessing the Food Marketing Environment of Target Segments”

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The extremely high rates of obesity have led researchers, government health organizations and advocacy groups to characterize obesity as an ‘epidemic’ (Institute of Medicine 2005a; Institute of Medicine 2005b; World Health Organization 2003). In the United States, although obesity is population wide, it is not equally distributed among socio-demographic groups. Ethnic minority status is associated with higher than average obesity prevalence among children and adults, particularly women (Ogden et al. 2006; Ogden et al. 2002). Researchers, policymakers and health advocates debate how food marketing strategies that encourage excess consumption of food and/or discourage physical activity create “obesogenic” environments (Hawkes 2004). A review of past large-scale public health efforts with elements similar to obesity prevention indicate that changes in the marketing environment will be a critical element for success (Economos et al. 2001; Koplan et al. 2005). Research has also described contextual differences in the type and nature of marketing exposures that may limit the effectiveness of health promotion initiatives aimed at preventing obesity among ethnic minority consumers (Grier and Kumanyika 2008; Kumanyika and Grier 2006).

The parallel discussions of the excess risk in minority populations and the importance of the marketing environment underscore the importance of understanding the marketing environments of specific target segments. However, discussion of specific conceptual and methodological approaches to assess the marketing environment of specific consumer segments have not been central to academic research or public policy discussions regarding obesity. For example, although government agencies recently recommended that food companies tailor their public education programs and market more nutritious foods to specific racial/ethnic minority populations, limited mention was made of the socio-contextual barriers these efforts may encounter (The Federal Trade Commission 2006). Although knowledge about the marketing environments of specific populations is limited, it is needed to inform such discussions (Grier et al. 2007; Kumanyika and Grier 2006). A focus on understanding marketing as a contextual variable becomes especially important given the focus on social marketing and transformative consumer research as social change mechanisms underlying public health, and public policy (Esperat 2005; Andreasen 2002).

We will discuss conceptual and methodological challenges related to assessing the marketing environments of specific target segments. We will draw from several projects related to an ongoing, grant-funded research program aimed at illuminating the marketing environment of African-Americans in light of disparities in obesity. In this community-based social marketing research, we examine marketing as a contextual factor on food-related attitudes, beliefs, norms and practices from both emic and etic perspectives.
Thus, we seek to have this research driven by realities facing the community (Esperat 2008).

In one project, we conducted field observations at three health centers that varied in their ethnic composition to inform the development of protocols to assess marketing as a contextual influence on childhood obesity. The observations allowed a qualitative assessment of context-specific marketing factors that may not emerge in standard survey questions. In another project, we conducted a systematic review of the available evidence about the food marketing environments in which African Americans live. We developed an analytical framework for defining the marketing environment of a population sub-segment, created a search strategy to identify relevant articles, and developed a coding scheme to assess the quality of identified articles. The assessment of the validity and reliability of the marketing variables across diverse studies presented key challenges for understanding the quality of marketing environment data. Issues arose with regard to making appropriate comparisons between target segments who may inhibit multiple overlapping contexts. Examples will also be drawn from other research in progress.

We will integrate across several projects to propose general and specific research strategies for assessing the marketing environments of target segments. We will also discuss issues relevant to translating the conceptual frameworks for the projects into the participatory involvement of the community. Finally, we will outline the types of future research that can address deficiencies in the current evidence base regarding how differences in the “street-level” contexts of target segments, including the marketing environment, may limit the generalities that can be drawn regarding population health interventions. The presentation aims to support the development of consumer research that generates practical solutions to contribute to the positive transformation of communities.

“Insights and Challenges in Studying the Effects of Anti-Smoking Ad Campaigns and Other Transformational Consumer Research”

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Scot Burton, University of Arkansas, USA
Richard Netemeyer, University of Virginia, USA

The use of tobacco is the foremost preventable cause of premature death, causing approximately 5.4 million deaths and currently responsible for the death of one in ten adults worldwide (World Health Organization 2008). Sadly, half of the 650 million global smokers will die prematurely (World Health Organization 2008). In the U.S. alone, smoking results in some 438,000 premature deaths each year and $167 billion in total tobacco-related disease costs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2008). Given this level of human and financial cost, it is not surprising that advertising and marketing communication efforts aimed at reducing smoking rates are viewed as critical (Fiore et al. 2004).

In this session, we focus on a set of adolescent and adult studies based on a multi-million dollar, statewide anti-tobacco advertising campaign in Wisconsin. We examine many of the methodological difficulties and compromises involving negotiations among diverse stakeholders (i.e., ad agency creative and media professionals, public health officials, policy makers). The campaign was funded as a result of the national Master Settlement Agreement between the states and the tobacco industry. Specific ads used in the adolescent campaign were targeted at middle and high school aged youth in Wisconsin, for which smoking incidence levels were higher than national averages. These ads focused primarily on industry deception/anti-imagery, with other themes addressing addiction and harmful effects of second-hand smoke. The campaign ads had been successfully tested and run in other states and were placed in youth television and radio spots in seven major Wisconsin markets over a six month period.

In this first study, telephone interviews were conducted with over 900 adolescents aged twelve to eighteen years. (One of the presenters had some input into the design and measures for the adolescent and adult studies.) Based on prior research, we examined predicted relationships among social influence (i.e., friends, siblings, or adult smoker in the home), prior smoking trial behavior, attitudes toward specific campaign ads, anti-smoking beliefs, and adolescent smoking intent. Two primary questions were addressed: (1) Do counter ad campaign attitudes directly impact anti-smoking beliefs and intent in a manner similar to that of conventional ads? and (2) Can ad campaign attitudes have a stronger effect on beliefs and intent for adolescents with prior smoking behavior and for those exposed to social influence? Findings show that ad campaign attitudes, prior trial behavior, and social influence all directly affect anti-smoking beliefs, and that ad campaign attitudes interact with prior trial behavior to strengthen anti-smoking beliefs (Andrews, Netemeyer, and Burton 2004). Importantly, our results indicate that attitudes related to the campaign, prior trial behavior, and social influence directly influence intent, and ad campaign attitudes interact with social influence and prior trial behavior to lessen adolescent intent to smoke. Overall, our study findings point to the importance of understanding key characteristics of the target population in the evaluation of counter-marketing campaigns. Studies examining general adolescent populations, while ignoring the measurement of important factors such as prior trial behavior and social influence, may be masking significant effects of the campaign.

In addition, separate ads in the Wisconsin Anti-Tobacco Campaign were targeted at influencing adult smoker beliefs (e.g., about the harmfulness of addiction, environmental smoke, and tobacco industry deceptive practices). In this second study, our findings for 327 adult smokers show that consideration of quitting is positively influenced by the interaction between the number of children living at home and beliefs about deceptive tobacco industry practices used to induce people to smoke (Netemeyer, Andrews, and Burton 2005). In general, implications for counter-marketing communications and for the design and understanding of future anti-smoking campaigns aimed at adolescents and adult smokers are provided.

We then discuss the many methodological challenges and problems inherent to field studies that limit the control of important factors that might differ among important political stakeholders (i.e., ad agencies, public health officials, policy makers) and can lead to non-optimal research designs. Based on our set of studies, this includes dealing with multiple advertisements in a campaign (rather than a single ad), different domains of social influence, varied levels of ad exposure, different types of relevant focal antimoking beliefs, lack of true control groups, unmeasured/omitted variables, single item and more ‘practitioner-based’ measures, lack of causal designs and related inferences, and use of multiple media. In addition, we discuss some of the challenges regarding the political process of dealing with different constituencies with widely varying perspectives in campaigns designed to promote consumer welfare via transformative consumer research.

More generally, we draw upon additional examples from our participation in important field studies involving market-based transformative consumer research. This includes participation with the Behavioral Change Expert Panel as part of the National Youth
Anti-Drug Media Campaign, as a Consumer Research Specialist with the Federal Trade Commission, and work for the Risk Communication Advisory Committee of the Food & Drug Administration. These positions dealt with important and difficult challenges involving campaign communications, design, assessment, and advertising copy testing and tracking. Our examples also include recent involvement in the Consumer Testing Group of the Keystone Center’s Food and Nutrition Roundtable, which is charged with developing a simple, easily-understood, Front-of-Pack (FOP) Icon system that aims to identify the healthier choice for consumers within each category based on pre-established nutrition criteria. Finally, based on these examples and studies, general recommendations are provided about how to best proceed in the design and implementation of projects on consumer transformational research.

References

“Community Action Research on Diabetes”
Laurel Anderson, Arizona State University, USA
Julie L. Ozanne, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA

Diabetes can be envisioned as a problem involving individual consumer decision making, such as choices to eat a healthy diet and get regular exercise (Moormann et al. 2004). Alternatively, diabetes can be conceptualized as a community problem in which social and cultural forces have a significant impact on community health (Kreuter et al. 2003). For example, diabetes is at near epidemic rates in many Mexican American and Native American communities (Giacchello et al. 2003). In this study, we use participatory community action methods to examine diabetes within a town where 23% of its Mexican American and Indigenous American citizens suffer from diabetes. Health care professionals in the community felt that existing preventative programs and services were ineffective in stemming the rise in diabetes. Moreover, cultural beliefs, practices, and institutions have a significant impact on individual consumer’s behaviors.

Participatory action research refers to a general methodological approach that seeks to generate knowledge that is rigorous and can be used for social action (Reason and Bradbury 2001). It is widely applied in community health research because this approach is based on the assumption that those people affected by a social problem should be meaningfully included in the research process (Minkler and Wallerstein 2003). Community members are not merely polled for their opinion, but are actively involved in defining and shaping the research process (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008). It is assumed that when community members are involved in the research process they will gain new capacities, they will become more conscious and reflexive regarding the problem, and they will be more ready and committed to taking action that was guided by research based on the needs of their community (Lewin 1946).

We examine an ongoing research project that was first based on participatory observation within a local advocacy group and interviews with members of this community. After the initial exploratory stages of the research, the findings were presented to a group of health workers, social workers, and community members where it coincided with and sparked an interest in the development of a community-based intervention. Specifically, a program is being developed for promotoras who are lay health workers and educators that work and reside within the local community. Additional interviews with community members who had diabetes were then collected and the insights from these first-hand accounts were cycled back to help shape the promotoras program.

During the fieldwork a number of challenging issues had to be addressed including length of time required to conduct the research, requirements for different types of expertise (consumer, business, and medical), and the sustainability of the social interventions. For example, while traditional ethnographic work often requires time in the community to develop an understanding of local culture and build trust with potential informants, the length of time required to conduct community action research is significantly longer. This longer tenure is due to the need to forge alliances among many different stakeholders, develop high levels of trust needed to get people to participate actively in research and action, and identify the organizational and cultural capacities needed to actually implement programs of social change. The methodological challenges and empirical results will be explored in the presentation.

References