Black Friday: a Video-Ethnography of an Experiential Shopping Event

Robert Harrison, Western Michigan University, USA
Timothy Reilly, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
James Gentry, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

The day after Thanksgiving, also known as Black Friday, has become a consumption event with more than 130 million people braving the elements, snarled parking lots, hours of waiting, and early morning crowds to shop on a day that has come to signal the beginning of the American Christmas shopping season. This video-ethnography provides an understanding of this consumer culture by examining the most unusual shopping day in U.S. culture. Based on our interpretation, we identify three categories of Black Friday shoppers, each with different roles, rules, and shopping strategies. Our investigation of the motivations of Black Friday shoppers offering insights into understanding shopping as a cultural spectacle and consumer competition, in addition to understanding extended family and organizational rituals.

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FILM FESTIVAL

SUMMARY

Russell Belk, York University, Canada
Robert Kozinets, York University, Canada

Not only does the filmmaking craft continue to advance, but as seen in this year’s Film Festival, so does the technical and artistic merit of the films and their theoretical orientation and sophistication. Because more of the raw footage for these films is being shot in high definition, many of this year’s films seemed to leap off the screen in their clarity. And better miking is simultaneously leading to higher sound quality. Such craft considerations are among the criteria used by jurors (the film equivalent of reviewers) in screening and choosing films to accept from among those submitted to the festival. When it came to choosing the two prize-winning films, craft considerations no doubt continued to play a role, but the treatment and interpretation offered in the film were likely of greater importance. Theoretical sophistication was evident in the winning films’ attention to prior literature and their concise condensation of their field-based data’s contributions to knowledge. It is the combination of all these factors that influence the People’s Choice voting, for they all contribute to how the film engages its audience. These audiences vote for their favorite film. The Jurors’ Award is based on a narrower audience composed of the jurors and the Film Festival Co-Chairs.

This year’s People’s Choice Award went to “Black Friday: A Video-Ethnography of an Experiential Shopping Event” by Robert Harrison, Timothy Reilly, and James Gentry. Set in the American Midwest, it is a film about the “Black Friday” opening of Christmas shopping on the day following American Thanksgiving. The film analyzes the shopping strategies of families who plan in advance how to get the special bargains offered on this one day of the year when merchants know they can get people up early in the morning or even get them to spend the night in front of their stores in order to take advantage of limited stock price specials. The film follows these families from their home planning sessions through the pre-opening lines, and into the stores. It provides typologies of different specialized shopper roles and strategies. In so doing, it shows how what seems like frenzied swarming can actually be well-coordinated strategic shopping in pursuit of the bargain in a spectacular environment.

The Jurors’ Award this year went to “Brothers in Paint: Practice-Oriented Inquiry into a Tribal Marketplace Culture” by Joonas Rokka, Joel Heitanen, and Kristine De Valck. The film uses the extreme sport of paint ball to examine consumer neo-tribalism. What was once an inexpensive informal sport played in the woods, has become an organized, sponsored, and expensive sport with standardized man-made barriers, well-trained teams, and prize money for champions. Like the Black Friday shoppers, these teams use carefully planned strategies in their quests to be victorious in the tournaments. Despite sponsorship and prize money, team members may spend $20,000 a year of their own money equipping themselves and travelling to contests. Building on a recent emphasis on community and consumer tribes in the consumer culture theory literature, the film’s narrative analysis helps make sense of such expenditures in terms of a consumer tribal culture.

This year’s films continue to show geographic diversity with filmmakers and subjects from the US, England, Brazil, Finland, France, Japan, China, Slovenia, Scotland, Ireland, and Canada. It does not exaggerate to say that the Film Festival is a window on the world. There is a rich variety in the topics and approaches of the films as well as can be seen in the abstracts below. At least one of the films shown this year has already been offered to the wider public through YouTube, an act we heartily endorse. Those wishing to view the films are encouraged to contact the filmmakers for further information.

PRESENTATIONS

“Black Friday: A Video-Ethnography of an Experiential Shopping Event”
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Timothy Reilly, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
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