



Reflections on journeys within the supermarket

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we deconstruct the ethnographic process to examine how adopting a multifaceted approach impacted our interpretation of the findings. The original intention was to undertake (only) structured, observational research to consider a fairly standard marketing problem – why do consumers choose some grocery brands over others. However we soon realized that such a format was unsatisfactory. Instead we recognized the need to consider both the content and process of shopping to understand the complexity of behaviours reflected. The results suggest that many consumers' lives are created around various realities and they use consumption to engage and experience these.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

在本文中，我们解构了人种学方法，以研究采用多方面的方法如何影响我们对研究结果的解释。初衷（只）是为了开展结构性、观察性研究，以考虑一个比较规范的营销问题——为什么消费者选择一些食品品牌而不是其他的品牌。然而，我们很快意识到，这样的形式并不能令人满意。相反，我们认为有必要考虑购物的内容和流程，以了解所体现的行为的复杂性。研究结果表明，许多消费者的生活都建立在各种现实情况的基础之上，并且他们利用消费去参与和体验这些生活。

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1. Introduction

This paper is positioned in the cultural environment inhabited by the supermarket shopper. Grocery shopping is often portrayed as a routine activity grounded in repetitive behaviour that carries with it little thought and complexity (Beharrell and Denison, 1995). We challenge this notion and show that there is more to understanding grocery buying than just behavioural measurements. To assume that it is merely a superficial exercise in consumer activity where utilitarian needs are the main motivators for brand decisions is too simplistic (Yim et al., 2014).

In one sense, by adopting a consumer culture approach, this study places emphasis on the sociocultural aspects of supermarket shopping generally not available via the application of surveys and experiments. Acknowledging that consumer culture theory represents a widely accepted perspective of consumer research (Arnould

and Thompson, 2007), the focus is on understanding consumers' personal and collective identities and how these are embodied in their lived environments, and their underlying experiences within the context of the sociological categories in which these dynamics are enacted (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Thompson et al., 2013). Drawing upon the theoretical foundations of consumer culture theory to illuminate the subtleties that drive decision making during the consumer's shopping experience, we build upon the work of Arnould and Thompson (2005, 2007), Holt (1995), and Kozinets (2001) to further develop an understanding of how consumer culture theory explores the behaviour of consumers who interpret the symbolic meanings encrypted in brand and retail settings as a way to manifest their identity, or those of their family. More broadly, CCT has quickly become a recognized institutional category that represents one of the three major pillars of consumer research, along with information processing.

This paper contributes to theory by challenging the notion that a single methodology will adequately explain in store consumer decision-making, and presents an alternative that uncovers unanticipated insights exploring both the mundane and complex activities of consumer shopping.

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We are 'accidental ethnographers', coming as we do from an academic discipline that is apt to shy away from in-depth observational research as its primary methodology (Chamberlain and Broderick, 2007; Kapoulas and Mitic, 2012) and which has a tendency to frown upon non positivistic methods (Silva and Ramos, 2013).

Customarily marketing tends to use measured constructs to predict consumer conduct (Dube et al., 2005), but these are rarely able to account for actual behaviour. The implication being that conventional modelling is forcing consumption subtleties to fit the laws of mathematics (El-Amir and Burt, 2010), whereas we propose that by applying an ethnographic approach, it allows participant nuances to construct insights as a way to develop innate understanding of the behaviour (Underhill, 2009).

1.1. The research question

The initial goal of the research was to develop a methodological mix that would overcome the limitations of traditional retail research where transaction data are assumed to be a sufficient reflection of consumer decisions about brand choice. As part of this, our preliminary research question was what are the mechanisms shaping consumer grocery brand selections within a naturalistic environment? The outcome of this was to form part of a study investigating brand loyalty for products where there are a high number of alternatives and where switching costs were low.

2. Stepping into the supermarket

Grocery shopping is often viewed as social practice (Miller, 1998) where the choices made during the buying situation reflects the link between consumers and their significant others. These shared characteristics, rituals and values have been viewed as an expression of family identity and as a way for consumers to construct and maintain their relational self (Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw, 2011). Such family identity is often communicated by the use of products, and symbols (Cappellini and Parsons, 2013; Epp and Price, 2008) found in the supermarket aisle. We take into consideration the works of Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw (2011), Miller (1998) and Cappellini and Parsons (2013) that suggest shopping is a way for consumers to create and maintain their self-concept via their choice of products and through exchanges with store artefacts such as retailer activity and store environment.

It is widely known that this form of consumer action usually involves consumers undertaking an evaluation of a variety of options and behaviours so as to make a brand choice. There is a large body of research that proposes how this is done (Chenting et al., 2003; Deshpande et al., 1982; Hansen, 2005; Nayeem and Casidy, 2015; Yoon et al., 2009), and it is well established that consumers will only gather information about a product until they reach a point where gathering further facts, without a purchase, is not practicable (Widing, 2003). To some extent, via the application of ethnography, we are able to appreciate these consumer decisions and purchasing practices as a multifaceted arena of actors, processes and buying activities (Brembeck et al., 2015; Sunderland and Denny, 2003) that the 'usual' statistical counting of brand loyalty measures would overlook (Rungie et al., 2013).

Added to the complexity of not only seeking to understand consumer motives, grocery manufacturers and retailers have concentrated on their ability to 'tailor' their offerings to the individual requirements of the market (Chimhundu et al., 2015; Silveira and Marreiros, 2014), increasing the amount of information consumers are exposed to prior to actual purchase. Whilst this has benefited the dyadic interactions between all involved, consumers are being overwhelmed by a variety of marketing messages in the form of electronic presentation, in-store offers and traditional advertising strategies (Hutter and Hoffmann, 2014). Given the

challenge of fully capturing the nuances of these influences, it is unlikely that a single quantitative research methodology will suffice. Rather, applying the interpretive perspective to qualitative methods has resulted in greater awareness about the impact of consumption experiences (Moisander and Valtonen, 2012). This is not to advocate that the positivistic approaches are now redundant, but by paying closer attention to participants' lives and practices, more meaningful outcomes will result.

3. Choosing an ethnographic approach

Researchers have theorized that the purpose of ethnography is the study of culture where the resulting descriptions are creative endeavours that allow insights to the realm of that particular culture (Schembri and Boyle, 2013). In many instances, ethnography is often identified as a practice that incorporates a range of different yet complementary qualitative techniques to capture understanding of an experience (Mariampolski, 1999). Core to its principles is the process of undertaking a thorough study of a few cases in a naturalistic context by applying these different methods and drawing on a variety of sources as way to gain holistic insight into everyday situations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and then provide a 'thick description' of these (Geertz, 1973). It is incorrect to assume that ethnography is just another form of data collection; rather it should aim to clarify patterns of cultural and/or social behaviour (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) that in turn provides distinctive interpretation of human action in natural settings (Tedlock, 1983) that often remain unarticulated by its participants (Gummesson, 2007).

Thus, ethnographic research enables the researcher to change their perspective from viewing the consumer as a passive information processor to one that views them as an active participant engaged in socially meaningful activities (Catterall and Maclaran, 2001). It is this premise that has been presented here via the blending of traditional interviewing (King and Horrocks, 2010), supported by the real-time imagery to create cultural inventories and examine any social aspects (Heisley and Levy, 1991). Sunderland, and Denny (2007) recommend that ethnography be viewed as an epistemic orientation rather than just another method so that, from this perspective, ethnography is an approach that researchers use to gain culturally and socially grounded knowledge.

The original intention of our study was to embark on only structured, observational research to consider a fairly typical marketing question: why do consumers choose some grocery brands over others? The topic itself is not unique (Park et al., 1989; Silayoi and Speece, 2004) with observational shopping techniques dating back to the 1960s (Wells and Lo Sciuto, 1966); however the methods applied in this instance would ideally provide greater appreciation in terms of consumer connectedness to preferred brands (Fournier, 1998) and how this reflects their own and their family's identity (Cappellini and Parsons, 2013).

We additionally support the notion that ethnography should be a multi-lens activity, where such data are also embedded in participant reflection and archival documents rather than just visual imagery (Gracy, 2004). If, for example we had taken a solely archival research approach, in this case six weeks of shopping dockets provided by our participants, we would have known where they shop, the brands they bought, how much they spent and when they buy, but this alone would not have answered our research question as to why their purchasing conformed to particular patterns. Observational data certainly contributed to solving this dilemma but would not give the required level of insight needed to add to the existing body of knowledge.

Our study adopted a quasi-ethnographic study (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003) which enabled this research to overcome the limitations of a single approach in understanding, describing and explaining complex human behaviours (Morse, 2002). The use of

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