Ethnography in marketing: Acceptance and relevance

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Abstract

In this study, we attempt to explore the acceptance and relevance of ethnography as a research method in marketing. We conduct a semiotics-led textual analysis of 15 leading mainstream academic journals in marketing for the years 2003-2012 to examine the prevalence of ethnography based studies. Overall, we find evidence for increased acceptance of ethnography as a research method among the leading academic journals. We further analyze these studies on the broad themes tackled, their units of analysis and propose a new classification typology for gauging the impact of ethnographic studies on marketing thought. We cite the need for wider applications of ethnography and conclude with two possible extensions for future ethnography based research, specifically in the emerging markets context.

Keywords: ethnography, marketing, consumer research, emerging markets

Ethnography in Marketing: Acceptance and Relevance

There have been increasing calls for the greater inclusion of ethnography based methodologies in consumer research (Goulding, 2005). Researchers have stated their conviction that ethnography as a research method is both relevant and appropriate for investigating marketing phenomena (Swan, McInnis-Bowers, & Trawick Jr, 1996; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Kozinets, 2002).

Both the academic and the practitioner communities in marketing have responded to such calls, the practitioner community seemingly with greater alacrity (Alexander, Burt, & Collinson, 1995). A possible reason for this could be the 'artistic' approach adopted by marketing practitioners to gather market information (Carson & Coviello, 1996). As the authors note, the marketing practitioner is willing to "gather information from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways" (p.56). The focus is on solving an immediate problem faced by the firm. Ideological preferences regarding the 'right' research approach are of secondary importance. Another possible reason could be the need felt by business executives for research approaches that offer "creativity, flexibility and spontaneity" (Milliken, 2001, p.75) to respond to business environments that are essentially unstructured and turbulent.

Multiple methods have jostled for attention within the broad interpretive paradigm. Ethnography, a research method that has its roots in anthropology has been considered appropriate for consumer behavior studies in diverse contexts (e.g. Goulding, 2005; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Ethnography has also been cited as a defining research method in Consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

However, ethnography is a field based research technique which requires considerable research time to be spent in natural settings (Goulding, 2005). For proponents of ethnography,

the time and expense need to be justified by the acceptance of their work in the larger researcher community. This in turn would provide inspiration for researchers to follow this path resulting in a virtuous cycle. Hence, the relevance of a research method in a particular discipline can be measured by the extent of its application to diverse research settings and on its acceptance by the researcher community. To the best of our knowledge, no past research has attempted to systematically look at the prevalence and content of ethnography based studies in marketing literature. This study attempts to address this research gap. We have assumed that the presence of research studies using a particular research methodology in the leading academic journals of a discipline can be used as a proxy for the importance of the research method for the discipline. We have analyzed 15 leading academic journals in marketing for this study. We find evidence for the prevalence of ethnography based studies but with considerable variation between journals. We also find limitations in the research contexts to which ethnography has been applied by marketing researchers. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows.

Section 2 defines ethnography in the marketing context and looks at the methodology adopted for this study. Section 3 discusses the findings from the study. Section 4 maps out the potential directions in which the use of ethnography can be extended in consumer research. We conclude with a discussion of the key takeaways, the limitations of the study and discuss potential future research opportunities.

Ethnography as a research approach in marketing

The use of observational methods to understand human behavior has a long anthropological tradition. Emphasizing the descriptive nature of ethnography, Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets (2013) describe it as "social scientific pursuit devoted to describing and, to a greater or lesser extent explaining, humanity's different ways of life" (p.62). Within marketing research,

the use of ethnography began with applications in consumer behavior (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Ethnography has been described as a method aimed at clarifying the ways "culture simultaneously constructs and is formulated by peoples' behaviors and experiences" (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994, p.485). As the authors further elaborate, ethnography is much more than a data collection method.

Two specific aspects have been described to form the core of an ethnographic study – naturalistic research and a cultural focus (Belk et al., 2013). Also, as Zambardino and Goodfellow (2007) point out, a particular reason for the prevalence of ethnography in marketing is because the analysis is not limited to conscious verbal recollections of the consumer.

However, a clear definition of what constitutes ethnography remains elusive. As Kozinets (2002) notes, "no two ethnographies have ever been conducted in exactly the same manner" (p.62). However, for the purpose of this study, it is imperative that a set of boundaries be defined to enable analysis. Attempts have been made in extant literature to describe the components needed for a study to be classified as ethnographic. For example, Mariampolski (2007, p.8-9) cites the need for one or all of the following to be present in a study for it to be considered 'ethnographic' – engagement, context, subject-centeredness, improvisation and flexibility, triangulation and a holistic perspective. However, for the purpose of this study, we use Arnould's (1998) classification as it provides clearer guidelines for classifying a research study as 'ethnographic' (as cited in Goulding, 2005, p. 299). The key points in the author's definition of what constitutes an ethnographic study are listed below:

- The study should aim to explain the construction of a culture and how culture affects member behavior and experiences

- The study should involve prolonged participation in the research setting

- The focus of the study should be particularistic.

- To the extent possible, multiple data collection methods should have been used to understand a single phenomenon

- The representations and findings from the study should be aimed at unraveling layered meanings of marketing activities for the consumer

For the purpose of the current study, we have analyzed extant literature using this broad definition.

Study method

To understand the extent to which ethnography has been used as a research method, extant marketing literature from the last decade (2003-2012) was reviewed. The overall context of our study has similarities to Hanson and Grimmer (2007) but differs in terms of the method of analysis. Since the emphasis was on finding the prevalence of the ethnographic research method in mainstream academic marketing journals, the survey of literature was restricted to the commonly acknowledged leading journals in the field. 15 leading journals were reviewed. To merit inclusion as an ethnographic study, the following criteria needed to be satisfied:

- An empirical field based study using the ethnographic research technique should have been conducted as part of the study. This automatically precludes conceptual and theoretical papers.

- Both ethnographic and netnographic studies would be considered for inclusion.

- The broad contours of the ethnographic study need to follow the guidelines discussed by Arnould (as cited in Goulding, 2005), specified earlier.

- Mixed methods studies including ethnography would be considered as long as the ethnographic study satisfies the preceding conditions.

The academic journals considered were the following: Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Retailing, Marketing Science, European Journal of Marketing, International Journal of Research in Marketing, International Marketing Review, Journal of Advertising, Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Marketing Management, Psychology and Marketing, Journal of International Marketing and Marketing Letters. The choice of academic journals for the study reflects the need for a broad representation of mainstream academic journals in marketing. It was ensured that no journal serving a particular methodological niche was selected for the study.

The analysis began with the generation of keywords to be used for the short-listing of articles. Keeping in mind the broad definition of ethnography used for this paper, we generated a large set of keywords for the initial search. Other than keywords like 'ethnography' and 'netnography', we have also included keywords such as 'ethnographic interview', 'depth interview', 'grounded theory', 'naturalistic', 'qualitative', 'interpretive', 'participant observation', and 'phenomenological'. The aim was to ensure that all articles in the specified period dealing with ethnography were uncovered. We then analyzed each of the journal articles short-listed from the keyword search based on the criteria specified for inclusion in the study. In line with the suggestions of Stern (1996) and Belk et al. (2013, p. 24), we conducted a detailed textual analysis incorporating the tenets of semiotics, reader response theory and deconstructive criticism. The three stages of textual analysis, viz., attribute identification, meaning construction and meaning deconstruction (Stern, 1996, p.63) formed the analysis framework for the study.

At the first level of analysis, a single theme was allocated to each study based on a careful reading and analysis of the text. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), we relied on

open coding to identify overall concepts from the studies and group them into distinct categories or themes. Through this method, distinct themes with minimal overlap were formed. Studies having similar themes were grouped together. Subsequently, each study was analyzed with respect to its purpose – the 'what' of the study. For classification purposes, the unit of analysis was taken as a proxy for this. Three different units of analysis were identified through this process and have been described subsequently in the paper.

During the analysis, we coded additional information that enabled us to classify the studies into two different typologies. The first typology used was Hunt's (1976) 3-dichotomies model. However, to overcome its apparent limitations, a new typology, suggested in this paper, was used to classify the ethnographic studies considered.

Findings

Ethnography as a legitimate research methodology finds acceptance across the spectrum of the leading mainstream marketing academic journals. The share commanded by articles dealing with ethnography varies between the different journals. This could be reflective of the editorial policies and the worldview subscribed to by the journal. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the number of ethnography-based articles published in the different journals.

Journals	No of Studies
Journal of Consumer Research	27
Journal of Marketing Management	15
European Journal of Marketing	10
Journal of Retailing	7
Journal of Marketing	7
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	4
Psychology & Marketing	3
Journal of Advertising	3
International Journal of Research in Marketing	1
International Marketing Review	1
Journal of Advertising Research	1
Journal of Marketing Research	1
Marketing Science	0
Journal of International Marketing	0
Marketing Letters	0

Table 1 - Breakdown of articles (2003-2012)

Even though a substantial variation is evident across different marketing academic journals, Table 1 also provides evidence for the receptiveness of such articles in mainstream academic marketing literature. It is also evident that a skew exists in terms of the acceptance of ethnography based articles among academic journals. For example, the Journal of Consumer Research includes the largest number of ethnography based studies, potentially reflecting the eclectic selection criteria adopted by the journal.

We followed this with an analysis of the key themes reflected in the 80 studies found for this period. The themes that have been developed are at a suitable level of abstraction to ensure mutual exclusivity. Table 2 provides a listing of the key themes identified. A preliminary reading of Table 2 indicates that the key themes explored using ethnography in marketing are limited. For example, consumption culture and consumer experience are the key themes explored in 48% of the articles reviewed in the study. The top 4 themes, consumption culture, consumer experience, brand community and retail/service experience account for 76% of the studies. This is an indication that researchers have restricted the applications of ethnography as a research methodology in marketing to limited areas.

Key Themes	% of articles
Consumption culture	27
Consumer experience	21
Brand community	18
Retail/Service experience	10
Brand experience	9
Marketplace rituals	7
Identity	4
Virtual community	3
Organization culture	1

Table 2 – Broad themes identified

We also looked at the unit of analysis as a means of identifying the focus of marketing researchers for the selected studies. The nature of ethnography and its roots in anthropology

suggest an orientation towards the individual as well as the community as the units of analysis. This is not far from the truth as is evident from a substantial number of studies focusing on the individual and the community as the two distinct units of analysis. However, what is also interesting is the focus that is visible on the service encounter between individuals. Based on this, we can see two types of 'individual' focused studies in marketing literature

The consumer dyad as the focus of analysis

Ethnography based studies have been used in marketing literature to explore dyadic relationships focused around a service encounter. For example, McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley (1993) have studied farmer/vendor interactions along with the buyer-seller interactions in the context of a particular farmers' market. Price, Arnould, and Tierney (1995) have explored service encounters for a river rafting company.

The trend is evident in the studies included for the present analysis. Varman and Costa (2009) study the interactions between the vendors and consumers in an embedded market setting at an Indian bazaar. In the same tradition, Thompson and Arsel (2004) study consumers' experiences of glocalization within the Starbucks brandscape while Ozuem, Howell, and Lancaster (2008) study evolving computer mediated marketing environments and the interactions within them. Clearly, the connecting thread in these studies is the focus on the dyadic interaction.

The 'standalone' individual

Ethnography has also been used to study consumer behavior at the individual level in marketing. Emblematic of this is the study conducted by Swan and Bowers (1998) who look at the traditional service quality parameters and discuss the limitations of traditional measures of service quality.

Many of the studies considered for evaluation in this paper deal with the individual.

This includes understanding children's behavior in a natural setting (Peile, 2003), consumers' changing approaches to music downloads on the internet (Giesler, 2008), attitudes to the consumption of space as a public good (Visconti, Sherry, Borghini, & Anderson, 2010), customer oriented learning (Wagar, 2011) and the individualization of communal activities in the context of services like mountain expeditions when they are bought in the marketplace (Tumbat and Belk, 2011).

The community in aggregate

Ethnographic studies focused on a specific group or segments are conspicuous in marketing literature. Examples include Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) exploration of the Harley Davidson biker consumption sub-culture and McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig's (2002) exploration of the Jeep brand subculture.

The focus on the community as the unit of analysis continues and is clearly evident in the studies chosen for analysis in this paper. Leigh, Peters, and Shelton (2006) explore the community of vehicle owners in the MG subculture while O'Sullivan, Richardson, and Collins (2011) explore the Beamish beer brand community.

The relevance of ethnography within the nature and scope of marketing

As is evident from the discussion thus far, ethnography has been used to study diverse marketing phenomena. However, to gauge the breadth of its applications in marketing, we require a classification typology which represents the scope of the marketing domain. One such typology, which purportedly achieves this is the 3-dichotomies model proposed by Hunt (1976). Hunt argues that all of marketing can be encompassed on the three dimensions of macromarketing-micromarketing, profit-non-profit and positive-normative. We begin our analysis by classifying the 80 studies under consideration on the three dimensions of the 3-

dichotomies model. Figure 1 represents the results.

Figure 1 – Ethnographic studies in Hunt's (1976) 3-dichotomies model

The results point to a skew in terms of the distribution of the studies considered for analysis in this paper. 62% of the studies are grouped under the positive dimension of the framework. This is a clear indication that ethnography based research has been used more to describe marketing phenomena rather than to offer prescriptive insights. The macro dimension includes 56% of the studies indicating that there exists a preference for studying the aggregate rather than the individual consumers. However, the skew is not very large indicating that the micro dimensions also find consideration among researchers. On the for-profit/non-profit dimensions, there is a clear skew against studies dealing with non-profit organizations and settings. 71% of the studies considered can be grouped under the for-profit dimension of the framework. This is particularly surprising as it indicates choices which are rather conventional by the researchers.

The important insight from this analysis is the skew of studies in the for-profit

dimension of the framework. This could be an indication of researchers' intent to avoid 'weird' contexts and a tendency to 'play safe'. The insights from the other two dimensions are not as clear. Even though 33% of the studies have been classified as normative, it is important to note that all of the studies are primarily descriptive. The 'normative' tag has been added to the studies which have attempted to provide additional prescriptive insights. This is not surprising as ethnography as a research method aims to be descriptive. In that regard, the positive-normative dimension of the framework does not add useful information to our understanding. Similarly, the micro-macro dimension has been criticized for being too broad and therefore not useful (Arndt, 1982). Keeping these limitations of Hunt's (1976) typology in mind, we propose a different classification typology relevant for the context of this study.

Ethnography as a research method cannot be divorced from the context and the culture it seeks to study. Therefore, we believe that culture would be an important dimension to understand how researchers have utilized the ethnography research method. For this, we adapt the classification of culture suggested by Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, and Gibson (2005). In this, the authors argue for 5 cultural levels, viz. individual, group, organizational, national and global. For ease of summarization and interpretation, we retain the first two levels − individual and group, and combine the remaining three levels into a composite, which we term as the population. In some respects, this classification of the culture dimension corresponds to the suggestion by Arndt (1982) that an intermediate 'meso' level is required between the micro and macro levels suggested by Hunt (1976). However, the cultural dimension we advocate is distinct from this as we are interested specifically on the focus of the study from a cultural perspective.

There has been a level of consensus among marketing researchers that the domain of marketing is the *exchange* (e.g. Bagozzi, 1974). Luck (1969) has advocated that marketing

should restrict itself to the study of the *market transaction*. Kotler (1972) has classified this traditional view point of marketing as 'Consciousness one' and 'Consciousness two'. The key facet of this view point is the focus on the physical exchange of goods with or without payment. A broader definition of exchange considers exchange of *values*. Kotler (1972) describes this as 'Consciousness three'. The key facet in this is the exchange of intangibles. This conceptualization of the exchange process allows a richer study of phenomena.

Ethnography as a research method has its roots in sociology and anthropology. This affords marketing researchers the opportunity to study phenomena which might not necessarily be restricted to the traditional view of the exchange process. If researchers have focused on richer phenomena, this dimension will be able to bring this out. We therefore consider a second dimension for the focus of the study in our proposed typology – exchange based on tangibles or intangibles. This dimension can also be considered as a proxy for the creativity of researchers in using the ethnographic method.

Finally, we retain the profit-nonprofit dimension of the 3-dichotomies framework as we believe that it offers useful insights. Figure 2 presents the results of classifying the 80 studies using the proposed typology.

Figure 2 – Ethnographic studies in the proposed model

The first additional insight from the proposed typology is that the bulk of the research (81%) in marketing using ethnographic methods is focused on what can be termed as the 'exchange of intangibles'. This means that researchers have explored contexts different from merely 'marketing as exchange'. It is an indication that the traditional view of marketing as the study of the market transaction involving a physical exchange of goods and services is of lesser relevance to researchers in the use of ethnographic methods. This focus has in turn, reduced limitations in terms of the phenomena that can be studied and potentially enabled richer conceptualizations of the data.

The second additional insight pertains to the cultural focus of these studies. The use of ethnography to study larger aggregations (e.g. national culture, organizational culture) is rare. The focus still remains on understanding culture as it gets manifested at the individual level or at the level of small groups. An important reason for this could be the heavy reliance on the context of the study in ethnographies. Cultural studies of larger aggregations could well be prohibitive in terms of time and cost to achieve using ethnography. This provides an opportunity for innovation for researchers to extend their ambition.

To summarize, our results suggest that ethnography based studies in marketing have found a niche for themselves in mainstream academic journals. The caveat remains that there is a skew in terms of the journals with regard to this acceptance. There are certain broad themes that researchers use ethnography for in marketing. These themes continue to remain limited. The units of analysis used in ethnographic studies can be broadly divided into 3 categories, viz., the individual, the dyad and the community. With respect to the nature and scope of marketing covered by ethnographic studies, we have used both an existing typology and proposed a more

relevant typology in the context of the study. We find a prominent skew in favor of for-profit contexts vis-a-vis non-profit contexts and contexts not restricted to the traditional market transaction. We also find that researchers continue to use ethnography to understand culture at an individual or group level rather than at the level of larger aggregations.

Potential extensions of ethnography

In this section, we present the case that ethnographic research has applications in areas that have traditionally not been focused on by researchers in marketing. We offer two alternate perspectives for the need for ethnography-based research, a cultural perspective and a consumption based perspective.

A cultural perspective

Repeated calls have been made for moving the focus of marketing research beyond the United States and Europe (Steenkamp, 2005). It has been acknowledged that marketing as a discipline can gain more varied insights by looking at issues which affect the population at large rather than restricting research to the 'developed' countries in the world (Gatignon, 2000).

A heritage of ethnography. The use of ethnography for the systematic study of human cultures is deeply embedded in many ancient cultures. For example, in India, ancient scholarly works have often employed ethnography to record information regarding culture and lifestyle. Among the numerous ancient Indian texts, the *Vedas* give details of religious rituals and rites, early traditions of healing, and social structures followed in the Aryan culture (Witzel, 1997)

The biographies of kings and rulers of ancient India record not only the royal lifestyle but also public administration, taxation systems, policy decision making processes, and governance. *Harsha-Charita* (the biography of Harshavardhan, Emperor of India) by Banabhatta observes minute details of the Indian natural environment as well as rural industry (Keay, 2000). Other

such works include *Vikramanakeva-Charita* (the biography of king Vikramaditya) by Billana (Kamat, 2006), and Tamil works such as *Nandik-Kalambakam* (the biography of Pallava King Nandivarman II) by a court poet (Kamat, 2013).

Even some scholarly texts have ethnographic foundations. The *Ashtadhyayi*, in which Panini had laid down the linguistic principals of Sanskrit around 300 B.C, the author has illustrated the usage of the language using examples of famous events and people during his time (Cardona, 1998). Yet another rich source of such writings is the accounts of many foreign travelers for whom ancient India was an important destination. Fa-Hien (Legge, 1886) in the 5th century A.D., Huen-Tsang (Watters, 1994) in the 7th century A. D. and I-Tsing (Takakusu, 2005) in the 7th century A.D. came to India in search of Buddhist knowledge and wrote books on the Buddhist culture in the country. Islamic travelers carefully observed the social and cultural institutions of India and provided detailed information on Hindu religion as well. They include Alberuni, who wrote the *Tehqiqi-Hindi* and Ibn-Batuta, whose accounts were published in *Rihla* (Nehru, 1982).

More importantly, the Indian epics, the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* and other ancient works (*Puranas* and *Bhagwada Gita*) describe semi-historical events, mythological stories, representations of cyclical history of the world and mankind, long genealogies and dynasties, geographies, cosmography, cosmology, systems of worship, temple building, medicine and more.

The presence of such a deep heritage of ethnographic storytelling has an important bearing on research attempts in the specific culture. Most potential research participants would be well-versed with these texts, and therefore more receptive to research utilizing similar modes of inquiry. This could potentially facilitate both the initiation and conduct of ethnographic

research in such cultures.

Building theory. Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) acknowledge the limitations and potential dangers of using existing theory to explain many of the phenomena in emerging markets. As an example of how theory development in a new context has helped to increase prior knowledge of a phenomenon, the authors cite the ethnographic study conducted by Arnould (1989) on diffusion of innovations in the Niger. As Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) note, the study led to an addition and modification of the propositions already developed and accepted in literature. This is in line with the definition of grounded theory as "one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.23).

This is particularly pertinent for research in newer and 'non-traditional' markets as theories are usually developed in a socio-environmental context (Craig & Douglas, 2006). As Hoskisson, Eden, Lau, and Wright (2000) have observed, there is a need for interpretive approaches to theory development in emerging markets.

The contention being made here is not that research needs to be undertaken from a developing country or emerging economy view point for every existing theoretical construct. However, for nebulous constructs like lifestyle values (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006) and for phenomena with visible variations, the researcher should follow an inductive approach guided by the data. In such research activities, ethnography could be the preferred methodological approach as it would involve research in the natural setting. Some of the approaches suggested in existing literature, viz., orienting it to the market (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994), broadening research related to the sales force (Swan et al, 1996) and understanding consumption (Goulding, 2005) could serve as guideposts for researchers.

Deciphering communication. Malhotra and Peterson (2001) describe three basic

problems encountered by researchers in developing countries, viz., the increased time and expense for the collection of primary data, the reduced accuracy of secondary data as compared to the developed countries and the inability to use data collection techniques such as mail surveys and mail panels. They conclude, therefore, that qualitative techniques including ethnography have an important role in eliciting respondent information. Though important, a greater role could potentially be played by the distinct cultural context encountered.

Hall and Hall (1990) describe context as the "information that surrounds an event" (p.6). The authors contend that context is culturally rooted. Cultures, therefore, can be placed on a continuum wherein the contribution of context to creating meaning differs. More importantly, context has an impact on the *content* of the communication. A 'high-context' communication is less reliant on the explicit content of the message (Hall, 1976) and "characterized as indirect, ambiguous, maintaining of harmony, reserved, and understated" (Kapoor, Hughes, Baldwin, & Blue, 2003, p.686).

Even though Hall and Hall (1990) acknowledge that individual differences and ethnic differences within a culture matter and that no culture can be exclusively at one end of the spectrum, the high-low context conceptualization is primarily etic in nature. However, it provides a useful perspective to understand the importance of information not explicitly coded or transmitted in the message. It indicates that the information surrounding an event has greater significance in certain cultural settings, the ones that Hall (1976) terms as high-context. Eastern cultures in general (Kapoor et al, 2003) and cultural contexts in countries like China, Japan and India have been rated higher on the high-context scale (Singh, Zhao, & Hu, 2003).

Ethnography as a research technique involves extensive participant observation and relies highly on understanding beyond verbal utterances. It could therefore be of greater relevance in

cultural settings where the importance of the information surrounding the event has a greater role in constructing meaning.

A theological perspective in consumption – India and China

It has been argued that religious beliefs have a vital role in shaping social behavior (Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2002). We find this to be relevant for India and China, two of the leading emerging economies in the world. Clarke (2002) argues that a pluralistic worldview, at a functional level, exists in India. The worldview is fluid and incorporates otherness with ease. The broader point being made by the author is that in a population as heterogeneous as in India, it is difficult if not impossible to pigeonhole consumer behavior into convenient boxes of existing theoretical frameworks. Stanley and Chung (1995) provide the example of an ethnological theme park in China as providing a "kaleidoscope of pluralism held together with the cement of nationalist rhetoric" (p.26). In different studies on luxury goods users in the Chinese market, a high degree of heterogeneity has been observed among affluent consumers (Gao, Norton, Zhang, & To, 2009; Oswald, 2012). Citing the importance of *guanxi* in Chinese organizational relations, Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) cite that it is difficult to understand consumer behavior unless the underlying cultural values are understood. The importance of the Confucianism ideal in China ensures that righteousness, propriety, integrity and filial piety are considered important virtues (Fam et al, 2002).

However, the complexity of the societies both in India and China preclude the use of one dominant characteristic or 'value' to define the population. For example, in India, just from a religious perspective, along with the Hindu majority, there is significant representation of Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Jains (Clarke, 2002).

The other important perspective that needs to be kept in mind when analyzing

populations in these countries is that they are in a state of flux. Both India and China have transitioned from closed economies to more market-oriented economies with the attendant significant rates of economic growth (Hubacek, Guan, & Barua, 2007). But, as the authors note, the fundamental inequalities within population segments continue to exist.

These inherent societal structures and the effect of major external influences have led to changes in consumption patterns. Belk (2011) cites the changes in Buddhism in the east where instances of monks handling money, eating junk food and sporting modern communication devices are becoming more prevalent. Thornton (2011) cites the transformation of the Cultural Revolution in China as a legitimate object of consumption in terms of its tourism potential.

These are fundamental changes which involve the majority of the world's population and which have an increasing bearing on the world economy. The need is not to test for the presence or absence of existing theoretical constructs identified in the western world. The need is to identify novel theoretical constructs which could then go on to define marketing phenomena of interest for the world at large. Effective alternate research methodologies are required for this. An example for the move towards this is the use of marketing semiotics to identify consumption patterns of affluent Chinese for luxury brands (Oswald, 2012). Ethnography based research could be particularly suitable in identifying such theoretical constructs.

Discussion

In this study, we have looked at whether the calls for the increased use of ethnography based research in marketing are being responded to by the larger academic research community in marketing. Using a semiotics led textual analysis of ethnography based studies in the leading marketing academic journals, we conclude that the last decade (2003-2012) has seen greater receptiveness of ethnography based studies in the leading academic marketing journals. We base

our conclusion on three factors. Firstly, the criteria specified for inclusion of a study in this analysis is strict. For example, no conceptual articles related to ethnography have been included though many such articles have been written in the last decade. Secondly, we have considered only the acknowledged leading academic journals in marketing which represent an eclectic mix of research methodologies and mainstream marketing thought. Thirdly, ethnography is only one of the many research methodologies currently being used by researchers among the many interpretive research approaches. In that respect, the number of ethnography based studies uncovered can be considered significant.

We temper our conclusion on the greater receptiveness of ethnography based studies in marketing journals with the caveat that significant variations continue to exist among journals. For example, *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Journal of Marketing Management* together account for 47% of the studies considered for analysis. However, as an overall trend, we also observe that 55% of the studies included in the analysis have been published in the years 2009-2012 validating our earlier conclusion of higher receptiveness.

We find a few broad themes that have been explored repeatedly in the studies considered. We also develop a typology specific to identifying the impact of ethnography based research on marketing thought. We contrast this with an existing generic typology (the 3-dichotomies framework) and find that the proposed typology provides additional insights and could therefore be considered more useful. From this analysis, we observe that ethnography has primarily been used in the for-profit sector but has not been restricted to the traditional market transaction. We consider this particularly important as the technique has been used to understand richer phenomena, thereby contributing to marketing thought. We also find that ethnography has been primarily used in cultural contexts manifested at the individual and group levels. We

conclude that the rarity of studies dealing with cultural manifestation at a larger aggregate level could be due to the inherent limitations of the method.

We suggest ethnography based research as a promising avenue for research in developing countries or emerging economies. The suitability of ethnography for theory development and the presence of an existing heritage of such studies are two primary reasons for this. We also suggest that ethnography could be used extensively in many marketing situations specifically in India and China due to the inherent heterogeneity on offer there and the strategic importance of the two countries in the new world order.

Limitations of the study and avenues for future research

There is an element of judgment in the choosing of specific studies for further analysis. Though this is inevitable (Kassarjian, 1977), we believe that a strict definition of the inclusion criteria and a sequential development of themes and categories has reduced the ambiguity. However, we are cognizant of the fact that a different research team could have arrived at different studies for analysis and different themes within the studies.

We believe that there is great scope in marketing to apply the ethnographic research methods both to newer cultural contexts and newer phenomena. The ability to use ethnography to study rich and complex phenomena should embolden marketing researchers to be braver with respect to the contexts that they study using the ethnographic method.

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