

ETHNOGRAPHY AS CONSUMER-ORIENTED RESEARCH IN EVENT MANAGEMENT: A CASE OF ROVANIEMI DESIGN WEEK 2013

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a historical background of ethnography research and its related theoretical underpinnings. The paper then examines the usefulness of ethnography in consumer research citing two examples from the conclusions of other researchers which demonstrate that ethnography could be suitably applied in consumer marketing, and strategic commercial research projects to understand in-depth lived experiences of consumers that are helpful for managerial actions. A case study of the Rovaniemi Design Week 2013 is then examined based on field observations of consumer experiences in relation to services offered, and identifies implications for event management. Findings show that understanding consumer experiences in cultural events could offer helpful knowledge to targeting consumers as an event management strategy.

KEY WORDS

Ethnography, Consumer experiences, Event management

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography as a qualitative research methodology has had widespread use across several disciplines such as cultural studies, marketing studies, media studies, and management studies. Perhaps due to its great importance in observing behavioural patterns, it has become more widely used in a variety of disciplines. Ethnography certainly offers rich findings in research but, could be problematic if not employed properly. Nonetheless, an example of a recent area where ethnography may be employed is in the domain of cultural events with focus on the behavioural patterns of consumers and the socio-cultural implications which are vital for event management. This paper highlights the historical context of ethnography and a brief review of literature about ethnography in consumer research. It then details a case study of personal experiences in carrying out ethnography as consumer research at the cultural event Rovaniemi Design Week 2013, and suggests implications for event management.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ETHNOGRAPHY

The origin of ethnography can be traced from the discipline of Anthropology in which it dominated for many years as a field methodology. Later on by the 20th century, ethnography was introduced as a research methodology in many other disciplines. Nonetheless, Donna and Gibbonz (2008: 280) argue the historical background of ethnography to have originated from Anthropology in the early 1900s as a result of demands for an appropriate cultural approach to the study of primitive societies. Certainly, societal elements of religion, language, and morality required a worldview of understanding based on interpretation and not merely description.

The early 20th century ethnographic work by Malinowski (1984) in the study of Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea, and Geertz's (2000) mid 20th century ethnographic work on the notion of *thick description* became profound contributions to ethnography research. Malinowski's study on the culture of Trobriand Islanders examined ceremonial practices and corresponding values in relation to other tribes. Meanwhile, Geertz's (2000) notion of thick description attempts to explain that every given social situation has more to be described in beyond what the eye observes. In Geertz's example of a Balinese cockfight, he argues that cockfights are far more beyond entertainment and gambling if one considers the deeper understanding of the politics among competitor's owners, size of bets and the agglomeration combined to enrich the bets of either side.

In the mid 20th century, ethnography spread to other disciplines such as Sociology where it was employed to answer cultural and interpretive questions. Focus was on understanding cultures and different ethnic groups in much richer and broader ways. An example is the fieldworkers of sociology's Chicago School which applied an ethnographic approach to study Chicago's rich ethnic neighbourhoods at the time. By the second half of the 20th century, ethnography had arisen to the grounds of self-critical consciousness featuring parodied writings of Miner (1956) about the Nacirema people. This era also featured the objectification of tribal people as savages and uncivilised on one side. On the other side, featured consciousness-raising and empowerment of the civil rights era. Miner's writing described the bodily habits of the Nacirema people as characterised by magical beliefs, the used for healing temples and sacred medicine men.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

For better understanding of pertinent issues in this paper, it's important to highlight some related underpinnings in ethnography. Bryman (1988: 45-71) provides typical examples associated with qualitative research, and applicable to ethnography. Firstly, ethnography views human behaviour as a product of how people interpret the social world. The ethnographer's task is to capture the process of interpretation to grasp the meanings of people's actions and the ways people make the social world sensible to them.

Secondly, ethnographers focus on symbols within a culture and to understand their meanings through observation. The researcher as such does not merely focus on "how" something happens, but goes beyond to "why". Geertz's (2000) example of the cockfight interprets not merely based on the entertainment scene observed but, goes far more beyond to understand the local politics associated with interactions between competitors' owners and the size of bets.

Thirdly, ethnographic researchers seek to be value-free in the research process as much as possible such that the researcher's field observations and interpretations are not influenced by the choice of untruthful informants which may lead to research findings that do not reflect reality. Furthermore, ethnography conceptualizes culture as external to the individual as Mead (1967) refers to the *generalized other*. The concept of generalized other is based on the notion that within a particular society, persons have expectations about actions and thoughts of others and thus act to elucidate their relation with the other as representative of the shared social system. In other words, every action by individuals is based on what is expected of them and in the perspective of the generalised other.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: ETHNOGRAPHY AS CONSUMER RESEARCH

Ethnography in recent years has often been applied in marketing studies with aims to observe and interpret consumer actions and their relation to product consumption. Perhaps clients, managing directors, project managers and event organizers may consider ethnography as a suitable approach for service development in business. This section of the paper provides a brief literature review on ethnography and its usefulness in consumer research. Donna and Gibbonz (2008: 279-285) argue the usefulness of ethnography in medical-related consumer marketing. For example, they argue that understanding the customer versus the product's features requires the task of the ethnographer. Related cases may occur where clients demand knowledge on what happens in the emergency room. The use of surveys and interviews may not be suitable to provide thorough findings as compared to using an ethnographic approach that observes actions to generate a deeper account of activities and thought processes involved. This is useful in cases where respondents may not be truthful for various reasons.

Another example is in pharmaceutical market research where in client's marketing problem may be the need to differentiate one's product to avoid its downgrading to commodity level. The client may wish to have a deeper look at the product's customers to understand less-utilitarian behavioural influences that could be used to differentiate its product based on psychological needs. Donna and Gibbonz (2008: 283) argue that quantitative studies could offer utility scores that show which product benefits customers most, but an ethnographic study through in-depth interviews and site visits to physician practices provides deeper results that suits the client's interests by identifying relevant customer segments and observing the different features of these segments' practice environment. In other words, the outcome of the ethnographic approach provides to the client a deeper analysis of the product's customers by identifying how to speak to each customer segment, and address differences in psychological needs and practice needs.

To continue, Elliot and Jankel-Elliot (2002: 215-223) argue that ethnographic research can be used to understand in-depth lived experiences of consumers by highlighting case studies as used in strategic commercial research projects and the implications to obtaining managerial actions. In an example, a spring 2001 Connected Household Study in UK (United Kingdom) involving 10 blue-chip companies from utilities, telecoms, brewing and pay TV (Television) sectors, an ethnographic research was employed to understand how everyday home life is transformed by technology and media consumption. The ethnographers observed and participated in everyday activities with 11 families for four to six days within which video recording, interviews, and field notes were used. Findings showed that living rooms had a role in recreation of cultural meanings within the lived habitat and media technology. In other words, the living room acts as a stage or space for

symbolic construction of homeliness (family leisure). Such a construction was influenced by the presence of a technology TV for which was consumed by the family together. On the other hand, personal computers were un-relaxing, un-shared, and much more a goal-oriented activity, meanwhile TVs were symbolically associated with leisure, play, and consumed as a shared medium of family togetherness. Elliot's and Jankel-Elliot's (2002) case example shows the usefulness of ethnography in strategic consumer research which provides variety of in-depth observations that quantitative methods may not have offered. Implications to obtaining managerial actions on product development within the telecom sector suggests that personal computers could be modified with similar aspects of TV such as larger screen size which may offer a symbolic role of shared-leisure consumption within a living room of the family home.

CASE STUDY: ROVANIEMI DESIGN WEEK 2013

Having offered a brief review on the usefulness of ethnography in consumer research, this case study is based on personal experience as an ethnographic researcher at the Rovaniemi design week 2013. Observations in this cultural event may perhaps be helpful for event managers and organizers. The research was based on field work assigned to me by the MTI (Multidimensional Tourism Institute) of the University of Lapland, with the aim of observing the seven day event and produce a report of main observations. Focus was on understanding the socio-cultural implications of consumer behavioural patterns by observing consumer experiences that influenced their prolonged stay at the event. The observations show that event management is perhaps a combined effort of not merely producers and organizers, but consumers by being active participants and co-creators of the event's experiences.

Organization and Aim of the Cultural Event

This year 2013 experienced one of the world's northernmost cultural events known as "Rovaniemi Design Week", celebrated in Lapland's city Rovaniemi, and hosted in Arktikum (Centre for Arctic Studies) and Pilke (science centre). The event was organised in its fifth time for a week with the theme "arctic lives". The event opening held at the open air arena between Arktikum (Centre for Arctic Studies) and Pilke (science centre) at evening time (18.00). The aim of event was to show case typical cultural life of the arctic region ranging from arctic resources, strengths, creativity, and expertise of the northern regions. Furthermore, its purpose was to educate guests and participants about techniques used in living and working in the arctic, and the availability of resources in the arctic, and how these are related to design.

Organization and sponsorship of the event was a combined initiative of partner organizations and institutions of over twenty in number. For example, the University of Lapland, HISC (Han-ji Industrial Support Centre) in Japan, Rovaniemi Regional Development Agency, science centres such as Arktikum and Pilke, and local companies like Arktinen Muotoilu and Arctic Power among others. Pertinent events during the week included a comedy performance, design exhibitions, design brunches, snowy performances, seminars and fashion shows. As an ethnographic researcher at the event, focus was on observing experiences associated with consumer behavioural patterns.

Figure 1. Open air arena between Arktikum and Pilke, RDW 2013



Source: Field observations

However, observing an event offers a greater possibility to view unexpected and inconsistent occurrences which one could not have perceived prior to the start of research. For example, realising consumers do not merely consume the products of the event, but also play a role in managing the event as active participants, co-producers, volunteers, co-creators and so on. For in-depth analysis, my observations will highlight in addition, demographic characteristics of event participants in terms of nationality, profession, age group, gender, and the implications. These observations emerge from three main phases of the week's event. Firstly, the event opening and Kamina exhibition, secondly the arctic lives seminar, and lastly the Lumotion design show.

METHODOLOGY USED

The ethnographic method of participant observation was the principal approach used for data collection which involved being an active part of consumer experiences at the event, chatting with consumers in everyday life of the event, having lunch with guests at seminar breaks, buying souvenirs together and spending leisure time together with consumers. However, without revealing the identity as a researcher and remaining invisible during the task helpfully avoided situations of bias. This was a means to get in-depth information about consumer behaviours and how they make sense of the events. In addition, a *mixed-method* approach was adopted to enable variety and deeper research findings.

In this case, *unstructured interview* and a *video camera* were used in some situations to collect photographic data and in-depth information. Also, *field notes* were made at the end of each event. Photographs and field notes were helpful to retain memory on important observations, meanwhile unstructured interviews avoided situations of imposing or influencing the responses of consumers (informants) which may not reflect reality. In some cases, *review of printed data on brochures* at door entrances of every event enabled familiarity with event participants. For example prior to attending the arctic lives seminar; brochures provided helpful information on names, professions and nationalities of participants. Three phases of the week's event were selected out of six for the study which included Kamina exhibition, arctic lives seminar, and Lumotion design show.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographic data may preferably be determined through quantitative research methods like questionnaires, surveys, and structured interviews. However, Table 1 below was derived through personal observations of active participants in each phase of event and with the use of unstructured interviews, participant observation, and field notes with focus on characteristics of profession, age group, gender, and nationality. These findings are limited to the three event phases observed in the study, and therefore may not be suitably generalised to the entire design week event.

Table 1 illustrates demographic characteristics of active participants in the cultural event. It implies that both women and men were offered the opportunity to participate in various ways as seminar presenters, volunteers, models and designers. However, women dominated in the domains of business and sales operation at the Kamina exhibition event, and modelling at the Lumotion design show. Furthermore, the table illustrates that the event had participants from a variety of nationalities with Finland making up a majority. Also, the professions of participants were a variety ranging from students, researchers, directors, managers, engineers, entrepreneurs, and designers which provided a rich knowledge on work life in the arctic. Lastly, the table completely excludes the age groups of elderly and children which imply the event was generally suited for adults and youths. Nonetheless, these findings are based on personal observations and do not necessarily mean children or elderly were completely absent. For example, at the open air arena, were some families with children who engaged in playing activities during the event.

Consumer experiences

Consumer experience refers to processes that engage consumers in a memorable way. For example, elements such as home videos, wine consumption, and skiing could enhance the sensory interactions of consumers. Similarly, Pine and Gilmore (1999: 15-20) argue that in an experience economy, customers seek to perform wider variety of tasks in events. Furthermore, customers do not merely seek to be entertained, but to participate actively in creating their own experiences. One of such observations at the *Rovaniemi Design Week* was that consumers played a role as co-creators of the event in relation to the event services offered.

Table 1. Demographic observations of active participants at RDW 2013

Event phase and dates	Professions	Age group	Gender	Nationality
Kamina exhibition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurs in Finland For example, Maari ceramics • Student designers from University of Lapland. • Business and sales operators selling souvenirs • Consumers (students, lecturers, tourists, city local dwellers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youths and adults formed a majority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were both males and females • Sales operators were all females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants represented a variety in nationalities ranging from Finland, Spain, France, Russia, Italy • Fins made up majority of consumers
Arctic lives seminar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development Managers • University Professors • Entrepreneurs • Students researchers • Engineers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were both males and females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most participants were Fins. • Other participants were from UK, Japan, Russia, Denmark, Holland, and Germany
Lumotion design show	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer students from University of Lapland • Models from Japan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female models outnumbered male models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finland, Russia, France, Italy, Korea, and Sweden

Source: Field observations

At the open air arena between the Arktikum and Pilke building was the service of art exhibitions of ice sculptures and a snow castle to showcase typical arctic life and culture. The exhibition purpose of the snow castle changed to become a playground for children who accompanied their parents at the event. Certainly parents had to prolong their stay at the arena to watch children play which became an experience of co-creation. It enabled children to have fun by meeting new friends and through plays. Perhaps one of the wishes of every event manager is to enable guests to prolong their stay and have enjoyable experiences which could be helpful for targeting audiences and service improvements.

The role of *consumers as volunteers* in events is an experience worth mentioning. At the event, there were a number of consumers; some were classmates, friends, and colleagues who for several reasons were there to observe friends volunteer as models. Important in this observation was that consumers whom earlier were active participants at the Kamina exhibition later on

volunteered as models for the Lumotion design show (organized by Hanji Industrial Support Centre Japan) which tended to attract many viewers most of whom were University students willing to watch school mates perform modelling and take photographs of them. Consumers became co-creators by volunteering as models and similarly influenced the great turnouts of other consumers (visitors) most of whom were schoolmates and friends to the volunteers.

Figure 2. Snow castle exhibition, RDW 2013



Source: Field observations, RDW (Ayonghe, 2013)

The presence of *leisure services* had an influence on consumer behaviours and experiences. For example, at the Kamina design exhibition boutique was a movie theatre room. This perhaps accounts for the prolonged stay of some consumers during the exhibition event. The theatre offered some of Finland's best movies that reflect typical arctic life and survival techniques in Lapland. The room brought together consumers of varying nationalities and backgrounds to experience leisure in the form of movie watching. It became a shared-experience observing that consumers viewed movies together alongside chatting and exchanging ideas. Also, the presence of a restaurant in the Arktikum building had an influence on consumer experiences. The restaurant did not merely serve as a milieu for eating, but a platform for relaxation and chatting amongst guests. The implication was that through both entities of leisure facilities, consumers spent longer moments of relaxation chatting with one another.

Figure 3. Lumotion Design Show, RDW 2013



Source: Field observations

Cost-free offer as an attractive experience to consumers is perhaps the cause for a huge turnout of guests, about 400 in number, on day one of arctic lives seminar during the design week. Certainly, a seminar that includes participants of managerial professions will attract a wide population with an interest in learning. On the morning of the seminar, upon arrival at the entrance, was a long cue of visitors waiting to be granted access into the hall based on cost-free offer. Most of the visitors had arrived the arena 30 minutes prior to the seminar.

Furthermore, the seminar was totally free of charge and could be attended by anyone on the condition of fulfilling the requirement of online registration which was again free. Seats were indeed full and the online registrations had been closed already due to the absence of empty seats. Free offers indeed attract consumers in their numerous numbers but this does not imply event managers should provide cost-free offers at all times as it must be systematically planned. For example, the event at hand should be one that engages customers or guests in memorable, emotional, or sensory ways such as knowledge gain. Consumers obviously turnout so great as a result of both the free offer and the perceived richness of the knowledge that may be gained from expertise by the end of the seminar.

Figure 4. Consumers at Kamina Design Exhibition, RDW 2013



Source: Field observations

Lastly, *social capital* as a consumer experience accounts for one of the attractive factors in cultural events. Social capital refers to relationships and norms between people, groups, and entities that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. In other words, people create connections with each other through various ways such as groups of friends in networks of relationships, colleagues in companies, people resident in the same neighbourhood, and so on. Through connectedness with people, a beneficial experience of learning and knowledge gain becomes what consumers at events greatly value. By doing participant observation, one could realise most of the consumers at the event were interested in learning something new. By conversing with one another, consumers become more engaged in new and interesting knowledge that may remain memorable to them. The arctic lives seminar was certainly an example of knowledge gain that drew numerous consumers to the event willing to hear the story from the field professionals' viewpoints.

IMPLICATIONS OF CONSUMER EXPERIENCES TO EVENT MANAGEMENT

Event management is a complex whole of activities that involves developing an event concept, identifying a target audience, logistics planning, and technical coordination prior to launching of an event. In recent years, cultural industries organize events for several reasons ranging from community development, building business relationships, marketing themselves, raising money and to celebrate. Perhaps, such goals could be achieved if consumers are properly targeted by understanding their needs and active roles in events, and the benefits event managers can get

from such role observations. In other words, consumers offer a contributing role for event management. What therefore are some suggestions for event managers to consider?

Firstly, engaging volunteers during cultural events could contribute to success as they offer exciting consumer experiences. For example, consumers become attracted to viewing friends and colleagues perform as volunteers in events. As such, managers could provide services that engage consumers in active participation such that they become creators of their own experiences. Leisure facilities could be considered in events which may help to prolong the stay of consumers through chats, relaxations, video watching, and restaurant venues. Also, managers could adopt a management strategy of partly giving cost-free offers at some phases of an event. However, such a strategy should be systematically planned for example, at the start of an event's phase that offers sensory experiences. This way, consumers become attracted. Nonetheless, these suggestions may not be applicable to every event and may depend on the purpose, duration, budget, location of the event, and so on.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the usefulness of ethnography in consumer research within the context of event management based on the author's observations at the Rovaniemi design week and cultural event 2013. The analysis shows that ethnography is a suitable approach to understanding the socio-cultural implications of consumer behaviours in cultural events by using mixed-methods of participant observation, unstructured interviews, field notes, photographic recording, and a literature review which underpins it. Also, ethnography as a consumer-oriented method enables in-depth information about consumer interactions within events to be derived which may not be accurate through the use of quantitative research. Lastly, findings demonstrate consumer experiences in relation to event services and that implies or suggests considerations for event managers to properly target customers as an event management strategy.

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