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IPSOS VIEWS

Ethnography: An Unfiltered View of Reality

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Ethnography – making meaning out of the mundane

Ethnography is a research method made for investigating cultural practices, rituals, consumer behaviour, routines and social norms. It helps our clients identify previously unseen opportunities through looking at people's worlds in a new way, through putting behaviour at the heart of our investigation.

Originally used as a method to understand tribes or cultures in distant lands, today it is applied to any culture including our own. Ethnography is used in numerous sectors – from healthcare, financial services and FMCG to automotive – and is so adaptable because of its dedication to interpreting human behaviour.

Despite being one of the oldest fieldwork techniques, it is often characterised as being a new, sometimes innovative, research method in market research.

The term 'ethnography' is sometimes misused and poorly defined by people in the world of market research, and has on occasion become a trendy word chosen to make a research tool appear more innovative, such as 'ethno-lite', 'self-ethnography', 'webnography', or even 'glassnography' (referring to participants wearing spy glasses).

In this paper, we go back to basics with a view to presenting a practical guide to the subject area. We cover:

What makes ethnography, ethnography

The case of identity theft: What isn't ethnography

Making decisions based on ethnographic insight

Definition:

ethno (people)
+
graphy (to document)



What makes ethnography, ethnography

1. Situation-based

Ethnographic fieldwork takes many principles of anthropological investigation (participant-led research, using observed phenomena as data, empathetic questioning methods, participant observation) and combines them with more modern approaches to data collection (photography, film, app-based recording).

In doing so, ethnographic fieldwork follows a number of important tenets, detailed below.

1. Situation-based
2. Say vs. do
3. An observational technique
4. Participant-led
5. An empathetic approach
6. Specialist, trained ethnographic researchers
7. The importance of analysis
8. The use of video

1. Situation-based

As opposed to other research methods, the fieldwork is not only based on a group profile, but on situations. If we want to understand the behaviours related to beer consumption, we will need to analyse what happens in homes in daily situations + during parties + in the bars and restaurants + in the streets.

2. Say vs. do

Ethnography is described as an interpretive method which illustrates the difference between what people say they do and what they *actually* do: for example, participants tell us they are healthy, but they actually eat a salty, high-fat diet and do little exercise. While this is theoretically true, it is rare (and often gives a disingenuous view of the participants) that this stark comparison can be made.

A more sophisticated view of the say vs. do gap would be to say that ethnography gets beyond what people simply tell us, to add a thicker layer of description that includes their behaviour; or, put more succinctly, ethnography tells us what people say *and* do.

3. An observational technique

Ethnographic fieldwork uses visual cues as data. Modern day ethnographic fieldwork often uses video cameras to record what participants show us, as we are able to see the wider context in which people live (their home, friends, family, weight, income).

However, ethnography is rarely purely observational, as many research projects need us to understand the 'why' as well as the 'what' (though there are techniques for analysing purely observational data). Ethnography is still described as an observational technique since many of the questions that ethnographers ask are derived from observing what is in the participants' environment.

4. Participant-led

Ethnographic research is always participant-led. This means that we use the participants' agenda (daily routine, work pattern, shopping trip, etc.) as the starting point for how our time with them is spent; it is their schedule, not ours. This means that they will show us the things that are important to them, rather than the researcher making assumptions about what is important.

As the day unfolds, we can then ask the right questions at the right time, making it not only more relevant but also more 'in the moment', bringing us closer to the behaviours that we wish to know about, and that really matter to them.

5. An empathetic approach

Empathy is a crucial ethnographic tool in interviewing as it allows one 'to walk a mile in someone's shoes' and to build rapport with the participant. Empathy is difficult to teach (though there are empathy training courses), and many respected anthropologists have said that 'ethnography chooses you; you don't choose ethnography', when referring to the use of empathy in interviewing.

It also emphasises the importance of having ethnographers do the fieldwork - and of only having one person in the field - as opposed to qualitative researchers who are used to asking a succession of questions with numerous people involved in the interview process.

6. Specialist, trained ethnographic researchers

While ethnography is sometimes seen as just another qualitative technique, it is important to stress the difference in skillset between ethnographic researchers and qualitative researchers. Ethnographic researchers use behaviours as the basis of their data - they constantly ask to see what people

are doing, how they do it, and the environment in which they do it. This requires studying and training, as it means tuning off the part of the human brain whereby we naturally believe what people tell us. Good qualitative researchers have mastered the art of good conversation, and as a result have not turned off this part of their brain. The skills are different, the investigation more diverse, and the insight uncovers previously unseen opportunities.

7. The importance of analysis

It is often said that ethnography takes a long time, which is true, but what is not commonly understood is that most of that time is spent on analysis. To make meaning out of the data that has been collected, ethnographers like to have at least three times the amount of time that they had in the field for analysis.

8. The use of video

Modern-day ethnography often uses video as the basis of the data collection. While video is commonly digested online and on TV, it is still a difficult and process-heavy way of working.

The main advantage of using video in ethnography is that during the analysis process many people can see the same thing that one ethnographer saw when they were in the field. Trained ethnographers are specialists in analysis too, allowing them to derive insights from all the visual data through interpretation and analysis.

The case of identity theft: What isn't ethnography

As market research tries to innovate and differentiate, many products or techniques are branded as being part of the ethnographic spectrum. The following techniques are regularly described as ethnographic in the industry, but these are not actually ethnographic.

- **Mobile ethnography:** Often described as being ethnographic because it is in-the-moment. Firstly, mobile ethnography is rarely participant-led, as participants are given directions about what to show, rather than you being there to observe them. Secondly, mobile ethnography is not empathetic, a key component of the ethnographer's tool box.
- **Self-ethnography:** Getting participants to show you parts of their life, often over an online platform, is not ethnographic for the same reasons as those above (mobile ethnography).
- **In-home interviews:** Simply going to someone's home does not make an interview ethnographic. Many in-home interviews that are described as ethnographic, or 'ethno-lite', lack the necessary time spent to build up rapport or demonstrate empathy. They are instead a set of question and answer sessions that are led by a discussion guide. On occasions, these interviews are filmed, but this doesn't make them any more ethnographic.
- **Vox pops:** Vox pops are a snapshot of what people think, and do not employ any ethnographic techniques. Vox pops simply use film to record responses.

Making decisions based on ethnographic insight

In market research, ethnography is more of a foundational study for many research departments where the business/research questions are very open and investigative. Ethnography is less well suited to more targeted research problems, or where there is little behaviour to be observed.

With that in mind, there are several ways in which ethnography is being used in research today. These are summarised below:

1. Creating impact through video
2. Observing System 1 thinking
3. Targeted behaviour change
4. Cross-cultural analysis of behaviour
5. Segmenting consumers by need states
6. In search of white space from innovation
7. Agile research

As a rule of thumb, anything labelled 'ethno-XXXXX' is unlikely to be truly ethnographic.

1. Creating impact through video

Video creates impact where a presenter with PowerPoint charts never can. Filmed ethnography delivers findings that convey empathy and emotion right from the participant to the decision maker, showing the voice and behaviour of the customer first hand. Video plays a crucial part of the ethnographic analysis (reviewing footage numerous times with numerous people) and dissemination of findings (through edited films) and is the 21st century anthropologists' notebook.

2. Observing system 1 thinking

"We think far less than we think that we think."

"We're not as smart as we think we are."

Ethnography is about observing behaviour, rather than relying on a post hoc account of behaviour. The world of behavioural science has demonstrated that behaviour should be our central point of analysis as many of our attitudes are derived from these behaviours. Observing System 1 thinking allows clients to see decision-making and product usage in action.

3. Targeted behaviour change

The application of behavioural economics has offered researchers a way of finding levers to change behaviour. In order to change behaviour we need to isolate which behaviours are of greatest interest to us, allowing us to target which behaviour to change. Ethnography helps us understand when the behaviour occurs, what happens before and after, and what kind of intervention could be designed to make a difference.

4. Cross-cultural analysis of behaviour

Culture is at the heart of anthropology, and in business, good cultural interpretation is what makes a product a success. Studying cultures by comparison to one another opens up new interpretations of behaviours that were otherwise not questioned. Cross-cultural analysis can help us examine mundane behaviours – such as breakfast – giving us new ways of creating knowledge.

5. Segmenting consumers by need states

We all become different people when in different places, at different times. Ethnography helps us examine how the place people are in influences these needs, or how the people we spend time with alter what we want, allowing us to segment people by the differences in their behaviour. Creating a behavioural segmentation from using ethnographic techniques allows us to target consumer groups more accurately and efficiently.

6. In search of white space

Looking for white space in a crowded market needs to be based on good consumer insight, yet too often, white space is thought of in terms of trend watching. Ethnography lets you define how products are being used in ad hoc ways to find space where demand is high, but no product is delivering.

7. Agile research

Speed and design drive much of today's research world. Agile research has become a symbol of success for getting stakeholders to make decisions quickly. Ethnography has become the key input for agile research workshops, bringing the insight from world of the consumer right to the heart of the decision-making process.



Conclusion

Ipsos responds to market demand with two offers of how to conduct ethnography:

1. **Ethnographic research conducted by the Ipsos Ethnography Centre of Excellence that communicates deep human truth through production-quality video.**
2. **In-home Immersions conducted by trained qualitative researchers who are using the principles of anthropology to help clients critique consumer behaviour.**

Both of these methods put good, investigative fieldwork at the heart of the approach, along with rigorous analysis approaches that are derived from anthropological research.

Reading list

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Oliver Sweet leads the Ipsos Ethnography Centre of Excellence, a global unit dedicated to promoting best practice ethnography across Ipsos and the market research industry at large.

His work has spanned over 35 countries around the world and regularly writes in marketing and research publications about the importance of understanding consumers as real people making in-the-moment decisions. Drawing on his knowledge of behavioural economics, he has worked with the UK government on behaviour change projects through harnessing the power of 'context' to influence healthier, and more financially beneficial decisions, as well as with the private sector on more targeted behaviour change programmes. Oliver also lectures at Goldsmiths College, London.

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