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Exploring Consumer Behavior Using Student Constructed Photographic Essays and Film Projects

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Abstract – Millennials can be characterized by a preference for classroom discussion rather than lecture, working in small collaborative groups, and a desire for structure and steady feedback. This paper describes an undergraduate course, Visual Methods for Exploring Consumer Behavior, where students examine topics in consumer behavior by constructing photographic essays and films as primary research vehicles. We discuss how the course is operationalized, how to encourage and support students in their endeavors, and how to avoid some of the pitfalls we have encountered.

Keywords – consumer behavior, filmmaking, learning methods, Millennials, photography, visual learning

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners - Exploring Consumer Behavior Using Student Constructed Photographic Essays and Film Projects provides educators, researchers, and practitioners with a course description about a novel way of having undergraduate students explore topics in consumer behavior with the use of photography and filmmaking as research methods. The techniques and methods used are especially effective in engaging Millennial students, and expanding the way in which they view the consumer world. For educators, this article provides specific ways to successfully operationalize a course like this.

Marketing students, accustomed to a world of imagery, nonetheless spend most of their time in business classes working with words and numbers; classroom imagery is usually confined to bullets on PowerPoint slides, or charts and graphs. Advertising courses are often the sole exception where any significant amount of time is spent on the analysis of imagery. Even here, students seldom interact with, analyze or construct imagery, and the time spent attending to the visual world is limited; students spend more time learning theory and thinking about copy.

In the last decade marketing researchers have been utilizing film to richly portray ethnographic data (for examples, see films at the ethnographic film production firm, Monde Moderne at www.mondemoderne.com). Although films are still, at best, considered only as supplements to manuscripts for academic research, there is interest in film as a medium to portray consumer behavior. Since 2003, the Association for Consumer Research North American conference film festival annually screens dozens of short movies constructed by academics (Belk, 2003).

This paper describes a course where students occupy their time exploring consumer behavior with photography and film as prime components of their research deliverables. Since our students are mostly Millennials, the course was designed to offer collaborative experiences, both in the classroom and out, and we provide significant structure, yet with opportunities for creativity and self-expression, Students receive significant guidance with their several projects, although we also inject considerable ambiguity, and we offer almost continual feedback. (Jackson 2009, Nichols 2008).

Structure of the Visual Methods Course

For several years we have offered an undergraduate marketing course examining the literature on visual data analysis, and the research methodologies of consumer ethnographic photography and filmmaking as ways of understanding and communicating consumer behavior. Learning objectives include understanding some of the psychological, sociological and anthropological processes affecting consumer choice, gaining experience in the analysis of qualitative consumer data, and using photography and video ethnography to describe, analyze, and interpret consumer behavior. After reviewing some of the visual studies literature, students construct a photographic essay and then shoot two film projects. The course concludes with a film festival and critique.

Operationalizing the Course

For the first few weeks students read in the visual studies literature (for example Beilin, 2005; Bousé, 2003; Friedel, 2008; O'Donoghue, 2007; Penaloza, 1988; Tinkler, 2008; Woodley-Baker, 2009). They also read in the visual methods literature (for example Brodsky, 2002; Harper, 2002; Heisley and Levy, 1991; Kuhn, 2007; Moore et al., 2008; Rose, 2007; Van Leeuwen, 2008; Wagner, 2006). Their first deliverable is an individually written literature review of their reading, shared with the class with short presentations.

The Photographic Essay

Steeped in this literature, students select a topic to individually explore with a still camera. To further stimulate project ideas we review a broad variety of consumer behavior topics: subculture analysis, purchase decisions, experiential consumption, psychographics, values, social influences, adoption of innovations, symbolic behavior, and consumer diversity. Students are directed into the field to shoot 30 to 50 photos, study the results, choose 10 or so exemplar photos, and construct an interpretive story to attend these photos. They write an introduction, short essays for each photo, transitions, and a summary and conclusion. Each photo is titled with something appropriate to the photo and its accompanying essay. We suggest they think about titles as if the photo will appear in a gallery. Titles should be suggestive and creative, and reflective of the intention of the essay. In order to write a short essay (just a few paragraphs) about each photo, students need to sit with the photo for a while, study it, and think about it; this is a novel process for students accustomed to the fast flow of images in their usual media environments. We allow two modes for this deliverable: a PowerPoint or Keynote presentation with the photos in the slides and the essays in the notes section, or a word processing document with the photos appropriately located in the text. Each student presents a slide show and oral presentation of their interpretations to the entire class. This provides a rich atmosphere for the students to exhibit and discuss their work, an opportunity to practice public speaking, and a venue for critiquing both the substantive and technical aspects of their photos and essays. We constructively critique the content and substance of the photo in relation to the essay, and we also critique the photographic aspects of the work, such as composition and lighting. This takes considerable time, even though this particular course is certified as one of the university's core curriculum writing courses and enrollment is capped at 20 students. Nonetheless, the presentation and discussion process is class-time intensive and can last several hours. However, this process is enlightening; students have the opportunity to see nineteen other perspectives on their visual worlds, tied to the conceptual context of consumer behavior. Initially, most students are descriptive in their essays, they need to be pressed during the construction process to become more interpretive, and it's rare for a student to offer a theoretical framework without significant coaching. As a writing course, we review and offer suggestions during the preparation of two or three drafts before a final version is delivered for a grade.

For most of our students this is a new experience, and presenting a photo essay reflecting both their creativity and technical prowess is socially risky. Building a supportive environment (Gilbert et al., 1996) is crucial to eliciting in-depth conversations and critiques, otherwise there is only a polite smattering of applause and a few general, vaguely positive comments at the end of a presentation. To encourage a safe environment, we start with a deliberately unpolished, weak photo essay constructed by one of the instructors, pointing out strengths and weaknesses, and, how it can be improved. We encourage our students to reflect on the photos for a bit, prompt them to get involved in the critique, and to offer their own points of view. This sets a stage where students understand it's permissible, and expected, to offer critical feedback, to discuss strengths and weaknesses, and to dig deeper.

The Film Projects

The photo essay provides an introduction to interpreting visual data, and to the more ambitious component of the course: film making. Unexpectedly, our students seldom have any previous filmmaking experience beyond generating short clips with point and shoot

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cameras or their mobile phones. There are two films to produce, and both are team efforts. The first serves as a primer, and is required to be less than three minutes; the second eight to thirteen minute film is much more ambitious— a thirteen minute film from students with little experience can become tedious.

The Introductory Film – A Filmmaker's Primer

After a classroom introduction to basic video camera technique and editing, students are assembled into teams of three and sent off onto the campus grounds with vague instructions about capturing some aspect of consumer behavior, to find a story, and to shoot some footage, perhaps about twenty minutes of footage at the most. This serves as an entrée to the craft and art of filmmaking; it provides a hands-on experience with camerawork, gathering audio, story building, and editing.

Typically, each story builds organically as the film teams explore the campus for topics and ideas, making decisions about what to shoot, and how to shoot it. They learn the mechanics of using the camera, positioning a tripod, setting up microphones, thinking about their shots, finding interesting angles, conducting interviews, and gathering b-roll (alternate footage to be intercut with the main shots). During this foray the story's basic form is to be constructed, but most of the time teams return with a sequence of arbitrary shots, believing they will construct a story during editing. They soon learn this is a problematic strategy, and quickly come up with a wish list of shots they didn't capture: an invaluable lesson.

We use this film project to introduce the idea of a rough cut, building to a finished film with successive generations of editing. While learning fundamentals of the editing process, students also develop an appreciation for the extended lengths of time editing takes, and they learn they can't procrastinate and expect to finish by the deadline. The editing process takes time; detailed editing, rendering, then exporting to a finished film format require computer processing tasks that can't be rushed. This short project experience helps inform their planning process and sets the stage for the next film, a much more ambitious production which will take several weeks to complete.

We screen these short first films in class and discuss the many issues the project brings to the foreground. Student enthusiasm is running high; they are proud owners of their work product, a completed film, and they are eager to begin working on the largest deliverable for the course.

The Second Film – A Most Ambitious Assignment

This film project is a video version of the photographic essay; once again the assignment is to explore and interpret some aspect of consumer behavior. Before production begins each student is charged with developing several topics, presenting them to the class in a round table discussion. We talk about the merits and interestingness of each idea from a substantive standpoint, as well as the technical and logistical hurdles the projects may involve. Sometimes students approach projects with a producer's perspective rather than a consumer's perspective, for example, proposing to interview car dealers or yoga instructors, instead of car buyers and yoga practitioners. Usually this approach emerges because of a personal interest in a particular business idea, or because someone has convenient access to a business person who will be an expedient source of interviews. Logistically, students don't grasp the

difficulty of actually gathering footage; they make assumptions that most locations are readily available shooting sites. Inevitably, a team will cavalierly start shooting at a mall, only to be summarily asked to stop and leave by security personnel. Students are also generally surprised that chain store managers will abruptly refuse a student film crew showing up on the premises without obtaining permission beforehand. We also discuss personal safety issues, approaching strangers for interviews, and obtaining model releases.

After this discussion of possible topics, which takes a couple of hours, we ask the students to reflect on the many possibilities and start affiliating with particular projects. We recommend groups of three; teams of four become unwieldy for decision-making and it makes for a crowd in the editing suite, teams of two can lead to decision making impasses. Sometimes there are loners who want to individually pursue a pet project. We encourage them to join a group but occasionally we allow one-person productions, with the caveat that they have the same responsibility for work quality as a larger group, and that they will be evaluated with the same criteria.

Projects thus far have included attitudes toward surfing, lifestyles of yoga practitioners, a segmentation study of riders on a commuter trolley system, watching people watch animals at the zoo, salsa dancers and their motivations, flow boarding (surfing on artificial waves), favorite object analysis, preparation rituals of club baseball players, attitudes towards clothing, cell phone usage by college students, and luxury sports car purchase decision behavior.

Video capture technology has progressed rapidly in recent years; not long ago we used digital video tape, now all of the projects are shot digitally, often in high definition. However, the ability to capture good audio remains problematic, even with prosumer cameras. Most inexpensive cameras don't provide external microphone inputs, and the interview audio is often filled with background noise or the signal is weak. This happens because the microphone on the camera is too far away from the subject. If audio recording equipment is not readily available, an easy solution is using two cameras, one for the video track with another small, inexpensive camera placed near the subject to capture the audio track. This is another reason three person teams are recommended: one person shoots footage, one captures sound, and one conducts the interview. Using two devices to separately capture video and audio is convenient in the field but synchronizing the two tracks during editing can be a little tricky.

Most of our students use Apple computers, even in the business school. Final Cut Express is a fine film editing program, and it is inexpensively available through most book stores. Final Cut Pro is available in campus media labs, and we have a videographer on site to help students with editing techniques as well as pacing and sometimes even storytelling. Students can learn most of the editing techniques they need to produce high quality films within an hour. We discourage using iMovie although newer versions may offer more sophistication for handling multiple tracks. However, iMovie is good for ingesting raw digital footage and processing it into a compressed format ready for editing.

Students learn that editing film to tell an interpretive story is a very different process than writing. They also quickly learn there are myriad creative decisions to make at every instance in the process, and that their decisions will shape the character of the film. An important student insight from this process is that every other film or advertisement in the

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world is similarly the result of this decision-making process. They begin to grasp their faulty assumptions that documentaries somehow relate objective truth, they see that footage can be edited to portray different perspectives and editing can manipulate emotional substance. We believe the class is a success if the only outcome is the development of this perspective: that all films are constructed to evoke a particular point of view, that they should be aware of this, to be vigilant and critical, rather than passive and accepting of the films they view. This deepens their capacity for critical thought.

Shooting usually takes a week or two, editing takes a week or two more. While students are on the path to the final version, we review and critique a story plan, a rough cut, and a penultimate cut. This review process can happen during class or with groups individually; both methods have strengths. Some students want to keep their films secret until the film festival, but it is pedagogically useful to conduct at least a few critiques and discussions at these milestones with the entire class.

For the final film we ask for the deliverable in three formats: .mov (provides the greatest amount of information but can sometimes slow the computer), .mp4 (quite compressed, with some loss of resolution, but easily played on most computers), and a DVD. This ensures that at least one of these versions will successfully play during the film festival.

The Film Festival and Course Outcomes

The film festival occurs during the final sessions of class. Screening the films is a celebration as well as a critique. After the applause at the end of each film we take a few moments for students to complete online reviews in real time on their laptop computers (we build review forms in Qualtrics). These reviews are later shared with the film teams. Then we discuss the film; sometimes we watch a film several times to explore certain passages in detail. By now the students competently hold discussions about the substance, style and technique found in the films; there is even a sagacity to their critiques and the discussions continue with little prompting from the instructor. One of our final tasks as instructors is to build souvenir disks holding all of the films, which we distribute to each of the students.

The student and professor workloads are heavy but student evaluations of the course have been very high, with some students each semester suggesting this is a favorite course of their entire university experience: engagement is high, the novelty is great. Students leave the course with a changed, more sophisticated critical perspective, a feeling of creative accomplishment and an interesting project for their portfolios and resumes. Several have emailed us to report that the project became a centerpiece of discussion during job interviews, and they believed that it was significant in the hiring decision.

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