

THE APPROPRIATION OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN MARKET RESEARCH: DILEMMAS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ASIAN PRACTITIONER

Pamela Gloria Cajilig

The marketing field is fraught with business expansion challenges that need to be overcome within a context of increasing time compression and feelings of uncertainty. This has prompted the use of anthropologically-associated concepts such as “tribe”, “culture”, “rituals” and “ethnography” in market research. Turning to these concepts gives marketers hope that they can still create a sense of control and stability for themselves amidst a commercial environment of rapid change. This article's aim is to show that the appropriation of anthropology in market research to obtain lasting consumer loyalty, universal applicability, and “real” consumer truths can both prevent and stimulate reflexivity and collaboration among market research practitioners, producers, consumers, and academics. My broad intention is to open a conversation about how local engagement across market research stakeholders and anthropologists can be facilitated, with some initial recommendations on how to spur the exchange.

Keywords: Market research, engaged anthropology, business anthropology

Unpacking the paddling end

To many marketers, the supermarket is like ducks on a pond. The ordinary consumer might see calm order in the rows of products arranged into centrally aligned and numbered aisles on the surface, but we see the feverish paddling of our industry underneath. The supermarket to us embodies the multitude of our battles for precious real estate: a place in the consumer's mind and wallet. During personal trips to a supermarket in Quezon City, I have tailed many an unsuspecting mother, eavesdropping and waiting with bated breath while she decides on which brand of iced tea (or diapers, or shampoo, and so forth) deserves space in her shopping cart. Our latest

AghamTao, 2012, Volume 21:42-63

advertising campaign was launched recently, after much discussion over the findings from a “mini-ethnography.” Will she pick my brand? Her teenage daughter wants an imported one for a change. Will she consider the suggestion? I notice colorful flaps of cardboard bordering the shelf display, a promotion from a competitor manufacturer, and I become anxious. Recently, this competitor had occupied the dusty and dreaded bottom-of-the-shelf, out of the adult shopper's line of sight. The bottom shelf is in our minds the most godforsaken place a brand could possibly occupy in the supermarket. However, this new brand had very quickly managed to get a more visible placement, which would not have happened if the supermarket owners did not see evidence of its increasing popularity among shoppers. Clearly, our competition is gaining clout.

My target mother grabs a few packets of my brand, and I breathe a sigh of relief at this tiny victory, forgetting for a moment that the real proof of successful performance will come in the form of year-end sales figures. I would like to think that this mother's choice of our product is the result of the whole brand team's efforts at rallying each other through brainstorming, fast-moving research, overnight meetings, and impromptu midnight phone calls in search of solutions that will turn the business around. Sometimes, team work isn't collaborative at all. There are debates, outbursts, frayed nerves, bouts of rejection and distrust, and disappointment at the realization that once again, personal lives will have to be put aside to win the perennial race against time, because end-year business targets wait for no one. In reality, however, marketing is not a linear process, although imagining that it is helps us achieve a sense of order and purpose amidst an increasingly unstable business environment. It is entirely possible that people buy or don't buy our products not because we particularly failed or succeeded at appealing to consumers as a team, but simply because, well, they felt like it. As much as we would hate to admit it, and while collective hard work can also pay off tremendously, sometimes the dogged paddling just doesn't cut it.

Consequently, this essay will tackle the motions and subjectivities of the marketing industry that often remain unknown to the general public, and which its actors go through in order to keep our brands afloat amidst challenges of sustaining business growth. On a broader level, I aim to give those outside the world of business a more nuanced understanding of a group of individuals whose day-to-day work, whether they are aware of it or not, has the power to influence how everyday objects transform everyday cultural processes. This is because the everyday experiences of the actors in the field and the minutest decisions they must make on product targeting, pricing, distribution, TV ad scripts, print ad models, and the like, have a direct impact

on how meanings imbued in consumer goods are socially constructed and are used to negotiate social positions in everyday life.

The intent is to shed light on the following central points: 1) marketers face certain challenges in having to deliver a given level of profit across limited time; 2) anthropologically-associated concepts in market research, such as “tribe”, “culture”, “rituals” and “ethnography” give marketers hope that they can still have a sense of control and stability amidst growing uncertainty; and 3) these types of appropriation can both prevent and stimulate reflexive and collaborative practices. I also posit that reflexivity and engagement are intertwined. Reflecting upon the research agenda and one’s positionality within the marketing context and society at large may spur the need to engage with colleagues and other research stakeholders. On the other hand, being given opportunities to interact with various research stakeholders can open avenues for one to further reflect upon practical and ethical implications of the research. The outcomes vary depending on the personal inclinations of those who manage market research budgets and the larger goals of the organizations they belong to.

My perspective is based on a rather uncomfortable position given certain moral and methodological incongruences between anthropology and business: that of someone who was first repeatedly made, unmade and remade as a marketer, and is now going through the same cycle of remaking and unmaking as a graduate student in anthropology. My experiences are mostly based on my work in Manila, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur as a Filipino marketing communications strategist employed in multinational organizations, who works with Asian and non-Asian marketing practitioners from other multinational organizations, from the year 2000 to the present. I also use the term “Asia” loosely. Much of the commentary available on the topic comes from non-Asian marketers and marketers based outside Asia. Also, the distinctions between, local, regional and global practice often tend to be unclear where marketing work is concerned. Additionally, I have had to sign non-disclosure contracts for all companies that I have worked for, a standard procedure in the industry and a measure for maintaining business competitiveness. As a result, I have kept confidential the names of specific clients and brands I directly worked on. Examples which give specific companies or products are culled from online data sources, which assure me of their public nature.

Reflexivity, engaged anthropology, and consumer research

To explore the relationship between anthropology and marketing I find anchorage in the notion of reflexivity. Here, I refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s

critique of intellectualism, which Wacquant attributes to “the structural discrepancy between his primary (class) habitus and that required for smooth integration into the French academic field of the 1950s”, and the disengagement he observed among academics during Algerian war of liberation (1992:44-5). Bourdieu defines reflexivity as “the systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:40). Reflexivity couched in these terms also serves as Bourdieu’s critique of the use of “data” for the mere “appearance of scientificity” and which has led to an unproblematized research process in which “everything goes smoothly, everything is taken for granted” (1992:244). Given that Bourdieu uses “the game” as a metaphor for culture, reflexivity is, in short, more than just knowing the “rules” of a cultural field; it is knowing how and why these rules have come about and are maintained.

Bourdieu cautions that the “preconstructed is everywhere” (1992:235), and consequently, researchers tend to take at face value the socio-cultural order and the orders that frame specific fields. Thus, the absence of reflexivity in social research leads to the production of knowledge that merely replicates the systems and social structures that shape the research agenda. Conversely, Bourdieu posits that focusing the research agenda on conditions that shape marginality and employing methodological reflexivity translate into researchers gaining a stronger sense of empathy, which will allow them to advocate for, rather than simply objectify, the observed (1999:614-615). A sociological message informed by reflexivity is not in itself the solution to the problem, but it does allow for those suffering to “find out that their pain can be imputed into social causes and thus to feel exonerated” (1999:629).

Setha Low and Sara Engle Merry (2010) echo Bourdieu’s call for research practices informed by reflexivity, and which consequently bring attention to human suffering. Engaged anthropology was discussed in the context of their personal commitment to “an anthropological practice that respects the dignity and rights of all humans and has a beneficent effect on the promotion of social justice” (2010:S204). The nuances of ‘engaged anthropology’ continue to expand as anthropologists find themselves applying the discipline to an increasing number of fields outside academia. Consequently, there are various points of view regarding the definition and extent of engagement. James Peacock introduced the notion of public anthropology, which entails “transforming academia and breaking out of the stratification of anthropology itself” (Low & Merry 2010:S207). Meanwhile, Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues for a militant anthropology, in which the discipline is imagined as a site of resistance (Low & Merry 2010:S207). There are a

number of forms of engagement, including: 1) sharing and support, 2) teaching and public education, 3) social critique, 4) collaboration, 5) advocacy, and 6) activism (2010:S203). In a business-driven marketing context, I maintain that the most viable manners of engagement involve sharing, support, and collaboration among the various actors who participate in the research process, as marketing work does tend to be team-driven. Social critique, advocacy, and activism through market research are also possible; however, these forms of engagement best work out upon the involvement of companies that institutionalize staff incentives for achieving humanitarian objectives along with sales objectives.

There is a company in the Philippines that evaluates their marketing staff's performance based on the ability to meet three types of targets: business, social, and environmental. If the team is only able to meet business targets, but do not meet social and environmental targets, they are rewarded with only a fraction of their year-end bonus. To meet social and environmental targets to avail of the full bonus, the marketing team is compelled to seek the cooperation of local government and the residents of the areas that they service. I was part of a research team that was tapped by the marketing team to identify the best ways to engage with their immediate communities in order to meet the humanitarian goals. The incentives the marketing team received would also translate back into community benefits. If the team achieved their humanitarian targets with the help of the community, the community would also be eligible to receive rewards from the company, such as the construction of communal recreation areas, or the refurbishment of health centers. Moreover, the study encouraged those of us in the research team to discuss our own take on the social issues at hand and to also look into our own personal networks, such as contacting family and friends residing in municipalities known for their environmental efforts, for inspiration on how to frame our recommendations.

Anthropologists face a range of ethical decisions that can prohibit practices of engagement. Dilemmas include identifying the extent to which they should influence change, the replication of colonial inequalities, and negotiating the research agenda of funding institutions (Low & Merry 2010:S211-S212). Meanwhile, institutional and organizational barriers to engaged anthropology include self-silencing or the inability to talk or write about political agenda, and the expectations of anthropological work to be "scientific, objective, and neutral rather than humanistic and personal" (S213). There are also barriers relating to tensions between universality and particularity—the discipline places much importance on particularity, which may contradict those who abide by universal discourses that are also significant to the field. On the other hand, international discourses about

social justice tend to use monolithic categories, which can undermine anthropology's recognition of the value of specificity. Low and Merry also bring up institutional pressures "connected with promotion, tenure, and access to funding" (S213). While the examples provided by Low and Merry are largely drawn from human rights and development work, these are also manifested in consumer research. The local, regional, and global power structures of multinationals particularly foster inter- and extra-organizational business competition, and can prevent the sharing of information and spread of empathy and sincerity as a condition necessary for engagement across practitioners in the field. My having to sign confidentiality contracts, for example, is a measure to shield company strategies and market intelligence from the eyes of competition.

The shift to consumer-driven marketing is what primarily prompted anthropological forays into the corporate world. Persistently increasing pressure to succeed over the competition has forced many corporations to shift from what Marietta Baba calls a "producer's view of the world" to a more consumer-focused approach to marketing products and services (Gray 2010). In the producer's view, companies make products depending on what is easy and cheap to produce, and then find a group of people to force their products on. In the consumer's view, companies first find out what consumers want through market research, and then customize how products are made and marketed. The website Marketing Teacher (2011) lists varying definitions of marketing, but a common thread is the need to profit by giving what target markets require, a clear indication of the dominance of the consumer view.

As the industry realized that adopting the consumer's view increases chances of business success, methods through which marketers anticipate consumer behavior have also changed. Marketing communication in the 1970s and onwards was largely framed by the need to identify consumer needs and motivations as illuminated first by surveys and later on, by focus groups (Gray 2010). Psychology initially provided "the fodder and framework through which consumption is thought to be generated, as well as best explained" (Sunderland & Denny 2007:46). This was followed by the noted entry of anthropologists in the industry, the coinage of "business anthropology" in the 1980s (Gray, 2010) and consequently, the appropriation of anthropologically-associated concepts in market research such as "culture" and "rituals."

In the book *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*, calls for reflexivity within anthropologically-informed market research focus on transparency and specificity in methodology (Sunderland and Denny

2007:199-209). This sense of reflexivity, however, may run counter to the motivations and subjectivities that structure the marketing industry, whose sense of confidence and stability partially rests on ideas of “pure truth” and predictability. This may compel researchers to restrain themselves from commenting on certain methodological and representational issues to give way to other team member’s business concerns. On the other hand, the team-oriented nature of marketing work may highlight previously unnoticed notions about culture and identity especially when working with cross-country teams who jointly commission market research projects and whose members simultaneously and culturally identify with the consumer communities observed. Such encounters may implicate racial and ethnic politics (Sunderland & Denny 2007:211-248). As contentious as they may be, they may also unhinge widely held notions of “culture” within the industry as neatly bounded beliefs held by a particular society and which remain unchanged over time, and give way to an understanding of the term as constantly shaped and reshaped by often untidy, contentious, and even tumultuous shifts in meaning and power.

Certainly, there are projects that illustrate the possibility of reflexive, anthropologically-informed consumer research that engages all stakeholders of the research process (Sunderland & Denny 2007). These have been conducted successfully in spite of constraints and complex power structures that govern the business environment. While the team structure of consumer research gives rise to considerable tensions that must be negotiated, the multi-stakeholder research team can be more of an advantage rather than disadvantage: clients help enrich the framing of cultural questions, while working with product engineers allows them to spot details anthropologists may otherwise overlook (2007:34-35). Consequently, “the incorporation of multiple vantage points meshes with epistemological orientations current within academic anthropology, even if these are not always easily realized,” and they help blur both disciplinary and institutional boundaries (2007:35). Sunderland and Denny further assert that collaborative, multi-vantage research also facilitates the implementation of theoretically-grounded, multi-sited research within limited time (2007:35).

The marketing field: motivations and challenges

Predicting consumer behavior and sales volume. The need to predict consumer behavior and sales volume remains central to the marketing challenge. At the beginning of the fiscal year business targets are broken down by divisions and individuals, and by quarter, month, and even week. The figures are based on marketing teams' assessment of the future business environment and more importantly, how consumers are going to think and

act within it. In a way, these assessments shape the script that will pave the way for successful business performance. Market research, among other reasons, is conducted to anticipate consumer requirements, mindset, and behavior at each step of the purchase cycle. When consumers have been adequately anticipated, this may lead to the successful delivery of the targets set. This success implies many benefits to the performing divisions and participating teams, including market research agencies: periodic bonuses, permission to hire more staff to unburden team members of responsibilities, company-sponsored holidays abroad, promotions, peer and employer recognition, stock options, and so forth. Meanwhile, failure to perform comes with its own consequences: spending more hours at work to make up for losses, reduced power and flexibility within the organization, and in dire situations, the loss of jobs. Market research budgets are often the first to be eliminated during recessions and other belt-tightening situations because this money is seen to be best reallocated towards activities that directly generate sales, such as discounts and promotions. Market research companies, many of which work with anthropologists, are constantly challenged to prove the urgency of conducting research in order to keep them afloat. Setting the context for the research in itself can require the negotiation of relationships at the local, regional, and global levels, with either great sales opportunity or great danger of being overtaken by competition as the most compelling justifications.

Time compression. The adoption of digital technologies both flattened the business environment and encouraged consumers to use faster, multiple forms of media other than the usual TV, radio and print. Given the resulting power dynamics, increasing expectations of speed from both employers and consumers have made it more difficult for industry practitioners to overcome marketing challenges. On one hand, a top-of-the-line mobile phone given by the office, while being a symbol of holding an important position within the company, also means having less power to ignore urgent emails, especially when they are sent by bosses and clients. On the other hand, companies that offer digitally-based products and services, which are easily refashioned (as to opposed to supermarket goods), expect a much quicker cycle of market research, product development, and marketing activity conceptualization and implementation. I have previously worked with and within mobile service providers in various Asian markets, where some advertising teams are built to work twenty-four hours a day in shifts; it is not uncommon for focus groups - from proposal development to reporting findings - to be mounted in slightly more than a week, for the new service incorporating the consumer findings (such as an unlimited text package) to be programmed in five days, and for the print ad announcing the new service to come out two days after.

If the research team takes too much time, the competition could just as easily come up with the same offer and give consumers another alternative.

Time compression can also curtail reflexivity and engagement. Sometimes a researcher, or any kind of marketing practitioner for that matter, may feel uncomfortable with how certain aspects of the research and marketing activity are carried out. Raising these issues can be seen, quite contrarily, as being unprofessional, from the point of view of other project collaborators and project leaders. Bringing up additional issues for discussion takes time, and it does not bode well for one's reputation to be seen as someone who tends to unnecessarily slow down the process. Marketing practitioners, including anthropologists in the field, can thus be compelled to practice self-censorship with the intent of giving other team members more time to chase business targets.

Compression in the industry also happens because of the increasing involvement of the State, which can limit market freedom by imposing stiff taxes on certain industries, such as tobacco and alcohol, and also communication bans to certain target markets, such as minors. These industries are anticipated to eventually end with a total marketing ban where even logos and other design elements that allow consumers to distinguish one brand from another will not be allowed. Marketers in these industries are pressured to boost their accumulation of sales before more restrictions are imposed. With speed as a major condition and expectation, research teams have to work more swiftly than ever if the aim is to have any bearing on how marketing activity is carried out.

Expansion. Aside from extending marketing activity outside the mass media space and into digital realms, increased competition and global economic crises have also forced the industry to expand practice in other directions. The shift of perspective from producer to consumer simultaneously results in expansion from the production of things to the production of everyday experiences (Sunderland & Denny 2007:26). Here now lies the difference between "product" and "brand": For example, Jollibee Chickenjoy is the product, but the restaurant experience, the delivery service, children's birthday parties serving Jollibee products, Tony Tan Caktiong's speeches to graduating students, advertising, the website, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and memories and anecdotes related to Jollibee are all part of the Jollibee brand experience. The consumption moment is also extended from buying and eating Chickenjoy to buying *into* what everyday experiences around the Jollibee brand could be reimagined as from the standpoint of both marketers and consumers: happy childhoods, *barkada* bonding, dependable overtime companion, benevolent employer, world-class service—there are

many possibilities. The intersections between branded communication and the intimacies of everyday life have therefore opened the need to “observe” consumers in their “natural habitats”, a task which the industry generally understands as the domain of expertise held by anthropologists, and more popularly, by ethnographers. Ethnographers are expected to know how to film consumers as they go about their everyday business, and therefore provide “pure” information about the market, which is also an indication that while the industry has opened its doors to anthropology, positivist approaches established earlier in the field still abound.

Mounting pressure to meet business targets in the face of recessions, debt crises and other economic burdens in Europe and North America have forced multinationals who have typically relied on the consumer power of these regions to look outward. The economic growth in Asia, particularly of India and China, has often been contrasted with decline in the "West" (Badkar 2011, Brown 2010). Consumers in Asia, previously understood as largely looking towards former colonizers for instruction, are now recognized as having unique consumption patterns, and the notion of "culture" along with other anthropological concepts now increasingly competes with the dominant psychological theories that initially guided marketers in constructing consumer realities, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Notably, interest in the possibilities "culture" holds in terms of predicting consumer behavior is not only coming from multinationals run from outside Asia. Businesses owned by Asians are also expanding to consumers residing in Asia and beyond, and likewise seek cultural instruction. The Malaysian government is engaging in place marketing to make the country attractive to Muslim tourists from West Asia (Husain 2009) and consequently, the Halal market (HM Admin 2011) has been a recent topic of conferences held in Kuala Lumpur. When used in the context of business expansion, the notion of “culture,” however, tends to be of the bounded, static, and unproblematized sort, given that the notion provides marketers the feeling of consumer predictability, and by extension, the hope and assurance that sales growth will remain stable through time.

The appropriation of anthropology in consumer research is considered standard market research practice in the United States, especially among Fortune 500 Companies (Sunderland & Denny 2007:25). However, the approach is still relatively novel albeit gaining ground in Asia, where many organizations find comfort in quantitative methods as means to understand their consumers. The expansion of research methods deemed acceptable by corporations is unfolding amidst forces of compression and expansion, as well as business world givens of having to increase profit levels. These forces collide with institutional and organizational politics that are unique to

the socio-spatial structure of the business environment. Such movements may impede the adoption of reflexive stances that could lead to a more engaged anthropology.

Consumers as 'tribal'

The use of tribe members or "natives" as a metaphor for consumers appears to have become popular content of PowerPoint presentations, the marketing world's go-to form of documentation, ever since marketing guru Seth Godin launched his much-discussed book *Tribes* in 2008. This happened around the same time the industry started to realize the threats and opportunities presented by the increasing use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter among consumers. However, the notion of 'tribal marketing' was discussed much earlier by Cova and Cova (2001) who emphasized that the experience of shared emotion is characteristic of contemporary societies, evidenced by the influence of the Internet on social connections. Cova and Cova assert that this desire for communion relates to a "pre-modern imagination that values notions contrary to progress, such as community, locality, nostalgia" (2001:3) as a reaction to the feeling of uprootedness brought about by modernity. Consequently, the use of "tribe" and its attendant notions

...(r)efers to this re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism and so on. It is borrowed from anthropology, which used it in order to characterise archaic societies where social order was maintained without a central power. (Cova & Cova 2001:4)

Cova and Cova move on to make parallelisms between postmodern society and ancient tribal societies, one of which is "they do not rally people around something rational and modern - a project, a professional occupation, the notion of progress - but around irrational and archaic elements: locality, kinship, emotion, passion" (2001:5). A key business process is the development, presentation, and implementation of a company's "Five-Year Plan" which, among other things, outlines the revenue and profits the organization wants to achieve in the long term, and the notion of consumers as irrational beings does much to raise the hopes of marketers where far-reaching objectives are concerned. While there are many attempts to truly address the market's requirements and incorporate consumer opinions on how products and services can be improved, this is not a foolproof plan to guarantee healthy bottom lines. Irrational brand loyalty—the idea that consumers will keep buying a particular brand's products in spite of

competitor attempts to lure them away, price increases, economic crises, and other unforeseen influences - has now become marketing's Holy Grail.

The understanding of human beings inherent in the notion of consumers as “tribal” reinforces monolithic ideas of culture that anthropology struggled to move away from in search of explanations that allow for sensitivity to the dynamics of meaning, power, and representation as primary influencers of the human experience (e.g. Marcus & Fischer 1986:8-9). It can also lead to the reproduction of an unequal relationship between consumer and producer, in which the latter’s dominance is imagined by marketers to be unlimited. Nowhere is this clearer than in Godin’s construction of consumers (and people in general) as tribe members who are lost and looking for a leader to guide and link them. Marketers, according to Godin, need to fulfill this leadership role. Failure to do so makes one a ‘sheepwalker,’ someone who is meant to live in fear and inaction, and therefore doomed to be an employee who will always be in need of direction. It is a lopsided construction that dismisses the possibility of multiple identities and accords agency only to those who have an inclination to be an entrepreneur. Notably, the marketing component is central to these conceptualizations, as *Tribes* is a business book and commodity aimed at an audience that shares business and leadership goals.

The idea of consumers as “tribal natives”, however, is symptomatic of another condition: the lack of engagement between anthropologists and marketers. Decades after the marketing field opened its doors to anthropologists, static definitions of culture and the lack of reflexivity they embody, and the potential of these definitions to reproduce power imbalances, still pervade. Perhaps this is because the idea of applying anthropology to business is polarizing and available positionalities for the most part tend to be perceived as extremes. On one hand, an applied anthropologist immersed in business is perceived by academics as willing to discard the notion of reflexivity altogether. On the other, those who are based in the academe are perceived by marketers as impractical in their appreciation of theory and concern for methodology. Notably, both stances function as career moves which are employed according to the specificities that define success in each field.

Everyday rituals, absent anthropologists

Manufacturing and service companies play a key role in popularizing anthropological concepts in marketing practice. Many of them hire in-house anthropologists to guide consumer research and product design; GM, IBM, Intel, Microsoft and Motorola are only a few (Gray 2010). Meanwhile, some

research projects that appropriate anthropological concepts as foundations for rethinking the consumer as the "native" are initiated by marketing communication agencies (advertising agencies in popular terms) to prove added-value to clients from manufacturing and service industries, and ensure the agency's stake in marketing budgets (Lai 2007). Building on the tribal metaphor, BBDO (Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborne, one of the largest communication agencies in the world) in 2007 released a study titled *The Ritual Masters* (Advertising Educational Foundation 2007). BBDO asserts that everyone in the world goes through the same five universal rituals covering the same time frames every day: 1) "preparing for battle" (the morning ritual); 2) "feasting" (reconnecting with your tribe over food); 3) "sexing up" (primping) 4) "returning to camp" (leaving the workplace) and, 5) "protecting yourself for the future" (the ritual before bed). The study also pointed out some cross-country (cross-cultural?) differences: the Japanese are less inclined to shower daily compared to the rest of the world; Americans are the most brand-loyal; the Chinese have the greatest tendency to have sex by appointment. The research, which took nine months to complete, boasts of "ethnographic research in 26 countries, 2,500 hours of documented and filmed behavior, quantitative feedback from more than 5,000 people, and interviews with psychologists, nutritionists and sociologists" (Advertising Educational Foundation 2007).

In spite of the relative depth and breadth of the effort involved, the study seems to have landed itself in a limbo characteristic of many market research pieces: being pseudo-theoretical and also lacking in particularity. This, however, is the note many market researchers need to strike for the industry to perceive their value in the process of delivering business promises. Theory that is not "actionable" is considered a waste of increasingly limited resources, and too much particularity threatens the potential of garnering high sales figures and effecting business expansion. Knowing that consumers in Brazil brush their teeth more often than anyone else can give a team of marketers confidence in the opportunity to launch a new brand of toothpaste, but knowing that there are fifty different tooth brushing behaviors might make them lose confidence in their ability to capture a significant size of the market. Studies such as *The Ritual Masters*, in spite of the monolithic grounds they are built on, can lead to assurance of predictability, rationalization of pre-developed plans, the perception of having expertise on the target market, and so forth. Heads of BBDO client companies were quick to relay the study's utility, with Pepsi-Cola's Chief Marketing Officer seeing the potential of the study to help increase their brand's "share of life, not just share of market" (Advertising Educational Foundation 2007).

However, this lack of particularity may yet again lead to old divisions between practitioners and academics. Those based in the academe may refrain from engaging with those involved in research production, and with the research itself as a point of departure for related studies. On the other hand, the highly competitive nature of business may compel market researchers to keep many of the more specific research findings away from public scrutiny. Another barrier pertains to how the profit agenda shapes constructions of culture. Given the task of cultivating large market segments for maximum profit, “culture” as used in market research tends to be equated with typification, thus potentially reproducing cultural and racial stereotypes that underpin them. The cultural typifications that are reinforced in large-scale, cross-country research are used to inform the production, promotion, and distribution of consumer goods. In turn, these goods may operate in daily life to reproduce gender imbalances, racial discrimination, class inequalities, and religious stereotypes.

This is not to say that research findings do not go unquestioned within the confines of corporate meeting rooms. Once, working as part of a multi-cultural team in Kuala Lumpur, I was asked to consolidate data for Malay-Muslim households. This compilation included a summary of a global survey conducted by a different arm of the company, by a research team whose members were largely based outside Malaysia. Before presenting to our clients, I was asked to present the PowerPoint I had created for the exercise to a small group of my immediate colleagues. Certain group members, who identified themselves as liberal Muslims, felt that some of the information portrayed Muslims in Malaysia as overly conservative and did not reflect the changes in attitude towards religion they have experienced among themselves as well as what they have observed among their immediate social circles. We therefore decided to augment the desk research with one-on-one interviews among our target consumers, which helped us better negotiate the cultural constructs implicated by the global research, and therefore have a better sense of which aspects of the research needed focus and explanation. This, in turn, fostered more confidence in the research compilation among our Muslim colleagues, which helped those of us who were non-Malaysian feel better-prepared for the client presentation. This experience is also just one of the many that shows that even though there were some of us in the team who were brought in as “foreign experts” and supposedly occupied relatively dominant positions within the company, the influence we wielded was open to question by colleagues from our host country, especially where issues of representing local consumers were concerned.

Ethnography as only observation

While consumers are the reason the marketing industry exists, perceiving consumers as tribal natives and therefore irrational also ironically influences marketers to see them as an obstacle to success. Amidst wanting consumers to be predictably and irrationally loyal to their brands, marketers put a double standard on consumers by also derailing their "irrationality," which can prevent them from acting "on-script." Consumers are accused of being prone to "rationalize irrational behavior, after the fact", to "have trouble accurately predicting what they will do, out of context", and not understanding "why they make the decisions they make" (Healy 2011). The market research agency Business Private Eye, which lists ethnographic research among the Overseas Filipino Market as one of its capabilities also goes as far to say that "consumers unconsciously or consciously lie when they talk about life, brands, and their lives" (n.d.).

The answer, it seems, to this perceived deceitfulness and inability of consumers to articulate themselves as outcomes of their irrationality, is ethnography. However, this is not ethnography that tends to result in reflexive and multi-dimensional cultural analysis as the intended best practice of anthropology. It is reduced to observation in order to cancel out consumer "noise" that prevents industry practitioners from appreciating target markets in their "true" form, and therefore also legitimize marketing "scripts" that will hopefully play out as successful brand performances. In light of these concerns, Asia Market Research (n.d.) markets in their website the "strength of ethnographic research" as its propensity to reduce "the sources of error associated with more artificial and secondary qualitative methods such as focus groups." Additionally, Ogilvy Discovery, the ethnographic research arm of global communication agency Ogilvy & Mather, launched in New York almost a decade ago. Their offering of recording consumer videos promised to lead to "an authentic experience, not one that is produced" (Tischler 2004). That researchers and videographers choose where to focus the camera lens, edit what is recorded, and cut away more footage for presentation purposes has been overlooked. Ogilvy Discovery seems to have moved forward from this purely observational approach with its renewed focus on China and India and with more recent publications relating larger political and social influences to their understanding of consumption practices across a range of demographic groups in the two areas (Ogilvy & Mather 2011). They have also recently hired a Mandarin-speaking area studies specialist from the University of Leeds as Director of Ethnography. It will be interesting to see whether their official appointment of an academic within their ranks will foster collaborations between practitioners and the academe, and whether this will

allow room for a more reflexive ethnographic practice within China's advertising landscape.

The marketing field's positivist preoccupation around "authenticity" and "no room for error" as grounds for the conceptualization of ethnography tends to simultaneously construct the actors in the research process along a scale of right and wrong. Marketers, the commissioners of the research, often locate themselves at the end of "rightness" and rationality. Researchers and consumers on the other hand, can swing between "right" and "wrong" depending on how "true" the data is perceived to be. This obsession with "scientific" expertise can therefore prevent examination of the research agenda and manners of representation, and discourage advocating for consumers and society. Furthermore, while the rhetoric of "consumer centrism" that has come to characterize marketing discourse has certainly translated into budget allocation for ethnographic consumer research, it does not necessarily mean that knowledge and its applications are taken from the consumer's point of view, or that brand teams are always putting consumer needs first before theirs.

Mobile ethnography and the missing researcher

While certain market intelligence companies still find value in the rubber stamp provided by the use of the term "ethnography", their service offerings have evolved to condense the research process even further than the ethnography-as-observation model has, in the interest of time and in getting at an even "purer truth." These new approaches do not only do away with the need for the anthropologist and the ethnographer; they tend to eliminate the researcher. Mobile "ethnography" is a technique in which consumers are recruited for a research panel and are asked to text back (or send pictures and videos, depending on the model) anything they see, hear or feel in pre-set formats in relation to the product or brand being investigated as they go about their everyday lives. These responses are usually sent to a central database which contains pre-programmed individual demographic and other pertinent data of enrollees so that every response sent can be traced back to individual consumer profiles. Those who purchase the research can access the results real time in a few clicks using a specially-built interface that already tabulates the information into formats according to their specifications, which are also previously agreed upon.

The title of a May 2011 research event in Chicago by market intelligence firm QualVu captures the appeal of this approach, *The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth: The Remarkable Candor of Webcam and Smartphone-Based Ethnographies* (Schwtizer 2011). QualVu heralds "a

shift from researcher-driven, out-of-context interactions and limited engagements" to research that is "consumer-driven, event-driven, in relevant settings, with extended engagements." The research process has been condensed to a point where the researcher and formal research analysis have also given way to the speed and efficiency of ad-hoc data table generation. This mode of research leaves even less room for reflexivity and engagement as "barriers" to "truth" by doing away with the researcher. However, asking for concise researcher-free data does not eliminate the personal bias that concerns many marketers as consumer responses will inevitably be framed by the agenda of the moment. Furthermore, the prioritization of what information to ask from consumers is partially driven by the individual concerns of research funders and the people they are accountable to.

Similar techniques that downplay the role of researchers are offered by corporate anthropologists, such as Steve Barnett of Planmetrics' Cultural Analysis Group, who offers as part of his expertise consumer observation videos and "unfocus groups," exercises which encourage consumers to relay their views without the help of focus group moderators (Baba 1986). Barnett uses "unfocus groups" to parse out cultural codes that govern consumer relationships with controversial product categories, such as nuclear power plants. I have seen similar techniques also used for product categories that involve issues of sexuality, such as sanitary pads. Augmenting face-to-face interactions with research participants with consumer diaries, poetry, essays, photographs, and home videos are also often pragmatic strategies that help capture data during instances when it is not feasible for researchers to be around, such as midnight snacking or while consumers are attending class (Sunderland & Denny 2007). Accordingly, a challenge to researchers, therefore, is to discern when these techniques are sought out to enforce forms of 'silencing', versus as a means to solve practical problems, and create an environment where research participants can feel safe and unthreatened while expressing their opinions.

Engaged anthropology in market research: what are the possibilities?

The marketing field is fraught with business expansion challenges that need to be overcome within a context of increasing time compression and feelings of uncertainty. This has spurred the appropriation of certain concepts typically associated with anthropology that enable marketers to feel that the business environment is still within their control, unpredictable as it has now come to be. Anthropological concepts as used in market research largely operate from the point of view of manufacturers and service providers who control market research budgets. The examples provided show that the desire to obtain lasting consumer loyalty, universal applicability, and "real"

consumer truths can prevent reflexivity within the research process, as well as collaboration between market research practitioners, producers, consumers, and academics. While I have presented the motivations for appropriating anthropology and the urgency with which they must be satisfied specifically in the context of marketing, I also maintain that they may apply to other fields, especially since time compression is felt in many areas, not just in marketing. The need to expand within increasingly compressed time therefore augments the barriers to engagement raised by Low and Merry (2010).

What are further possibilities for engagement between marketers and anthropologists? Baba enumerates time- and cost- effective problem-solving ability, and social science competency and teamwork as some of the skills that are necessary for anthropologists to succeed in business research and states that acquiring these skills will entail the need for intersections between pedagogical and applied contexts (1986:22-23). Consequently, “training in business anthropology should include internships, apprenticeships, or other real-world experiences in which students can learn first-hand the crucial importance of time- and cost- effective diagnosis and prescription for organizational problems” (1986:22-23). Anthropologists with consumer research experience can therefore teach MBA and Business Anthropology courses, which will facilitate exchange between practitioners, academics, and students. These courses should double as venues to explore the problems and opportunities brought about by the use of “culture” and their practical relevance to the corporate setting. Conversations can also be initiated through formal channels such as meetings and marketing conferences, and through obtaining presence in industry associations, such as business clubs, chambers of commerce, and marketing associations. Engaging with these organizations will also open avenues to collaborate with other research stakeholders, such as market research agencies and advertising agencies. Furthermore, some companies have made it a point to include consumers as members of their marketing teams; certain CEOs have gone as far as arranging for quarterly conversations with ordinary consumers to augment standard market research practices. These efforts raise ethical questions within themselves, but they are at the very least attempts to relate to consumers on the level, without the sort of objectifications inherent in the conduct of surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Clearly, anthropologists can play a role in strengthening the business community’s engagement with society at large. However, before we can identify opportunities, we need to recognize that power in the marketing field is wielded mostly by decision makers located at top management—in other words, the ‘C-Suite’ (CEOs, CMOs, CFOs, COOs, CTOs, etc.), whose

inclinations, emotions, and obsessions, while shaped by those who surround them, do primarily drive the marketing agenda and research priorities. If they are not convinced that a company must adapt to the concerns of its immediate community, it will be difficult to garner attention and support from the company for a particular engagement. It is therefore important to identify those at the top level who recognize the role that businesses and humanistic research can play in facilitating social justice, and for the anthropological community to build a relationship with these individuals. Fortunately, the increasing popularity of social entrepreneurship as a business model has given rise to a generation of socially-conscious entrepreneurs and brand managers. The newly-formed Design Institute of the Philippines, for example, has started to organize venues for discussion between young, up-and-coming social entrepreneurs, anthropologists and ethnographers through face-to-face meetings as well as through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. These collaborations, most of which focus on how the fields of research, design, and business can be used to solve social problems, have also been opened up to the public via online social tools.

The potency of back channels and informal settings should not be underestimated. Some of the inspiration for framing current and future research emerges not in the boardroom, but during impromptu visits to spaces of purchase and consumption, such as my supermarket “tailgating” experiences that served as the introductory narrative to this paper. Periodic visits to grocery stalls, shopping malls, schools, offices, and homes especially serve as fertile ground for the exchange of views because each team member tends to focus on a dimension of everyday life that differs from the rest. One research initiative conducted for a food company on children and notions of independence was conceptualized out of a spur-of-the-moment trip to a gaming center in Makati, where advertising executives, creative directors, and strategists such as myself pondered on the breadth of games available and on how children decided which booth to play at and which prizes to redeem from their efforts. Also, many issues, research-related and otherwise, are ironed out outside the formality of meeting rooms. Car rides to research sites, late night dinners after a long day of focus groups, and post-research presentation *merienda* provide social atmospheres that are conducive to more candid, introspective, and sincere discussions that go beyond direct business needs and bleed into the realm of social concerns. Lastly, while the institutionalization of humanitarian agenda from top to bottom in corporations undoubtedly leads to critical reflection on how marketing practices impact the larger society, informal venues allow the veneer of expertise to fade into the background to make way for genuine

concern as the spark that ignites a more engaged anthropology, in a field where many residents of the ivory tower have written off as incapable of empathy.

References

- Advertising Educational Foundation. (11 May 2007). 'BBDO - The Ritual Masters: The Secret is to become a "fortress" brand.' In *Advertising Educational Foundation*. [Retrieved on September 21, 2011 from: http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/research/data/7000].
- Asia Market Research. (n.d.) 'Ethnographic Research'. *Asia Market Research.com*. [Market Research Terminology Index>Ethnographic Research] Retrieved 30 April 2012: <http://www.asiamarketresearch.com/glossary/ethnography.htm>.
- Baba, Marietta. (1986). Business and Industrial Anthropology: An Overview. *NAPA Bulletin*, 2.
- Badkar, Mamta. (5 Feb. 2011). 'Race of the Century: Is India Or China The Next Economic Superpower?' In *Business Insider*. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011 from <http://www.businessinsider.com/are-you-betting-on-china-or-india-2011-1>].
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1999). *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre & Loic J.D. Wacquant. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brady, Diane. (10 May 2007). 'Daily Rituals of the World'. In *BloombergBusinessweek - Business News, Stock Market & Financial Advice*. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011 from <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2007-05-10/daily-rituals-of-the-worldbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>.]
- Brown, Gordon. (8 Dec 2010). 'How the west can reverse a decade of decline'. *The Financial Times*. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0a7bf96e-030a-11e0-bb1e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2315k3QMC>].
- Business Private Eye. (n.d.). 'Services'. *Business Private Eye*. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011: <http://www.businessprivateeye.com/services.html>].
- Cova, Bernard and Veronique Cova. (Jan. 2001). The Tribalisation of Society And Its Impact On The Conduct of Marketing. *Visionary*

Marketing and Information Systems [Revised paper for the *European Journal of Marketing*: Special Issue: Societal Marketing in 2002 and Beyond. Version: January 2001. Published on <http://visionarymarketing.com> with the author's consent. Retrieved 7 August 2012 from http://lola.hec.ulg.ac.be/courses/MARK0006_1/pages/modules/module2/co-va-tribe-2001.pdf].

Godin, Seth. (2008). *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*. New York: Portfolio.

Gray, Paula. (8 Aug. 2010). 'Business Anthropology and The Culture of Product Managers'. *Association of Product Management and Product Marketing* (AIPMM). [Retrieved 21 Sept 2011 from <http://www.aipmm.com/html/newsletter/archives/BusinessAnthroAndProductManagers.pdf>].

Healy, Mark. (6 Sept. 2011). 'The New Buzzword in Marketing: Ethnography'. *The Globe and Mail*. [Retrieved Sept. 2011 from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/small-business/sb-marketing/advertising/the-new-buzzword-in-marketing-ethnography/article2154544/>].

HM Admin. (26 Jan 2011). 'Positioning Malaysia as a global halal hub with MIHAS buying mission.' *Halal Media: Halal Community Blog-Magazine Portal*. [Retrieved 30 April 2012 from <http://halalmedia.net/positioning-malaysia-global-halal-hub-mihas-buying-mission/>].

Husain, Shakir. (3 May 2009). Middle East Tourists to Malaysia Grow 17%. *Gulfnews.com*. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011 from <http://gulfnews.com/business/tourism/middle-east-tourists-to-malaysia-grow-17-1.235253>].

Lai, Adrian. (11 May 2007). 'New BBDO Study - Daily Rituals of the World'. *PSFK-Your go-to source for New Ideas and Inspiration*. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011 from http://www.psfk.com/2007/05/new_bbdo_study_.html].

Low, Seta & Sara Engle Merry. (2010). Engaged Anthropology: Diversity and Dilemmas: An Introduction to Supplement 2. *Current Anthropology* 51:S203-226.

Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer. (1986). *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Ogilvy & Mather. (6 Aug. 2010). 'Ogilvy Appoints Dedicated Ethnographer'. In *Press Releases*. [Press release retrieved 21 Sept. 2011

from <http://www.ogilvy.com/News/Press-Releases/August-2010-Dr-Michael-Griffiths-Ethnography.aspx>].

Schwitzer, Kristin. (4 May 2011). #TDMR Live: Smartphone-based Ethnographies with P&G and QualVu. *The Market Research Event*. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011 from <http://www.themarketresearcheventblog.com/2011/05/tdmr-live-smartphone-based.html>].

Sunderland, Patricia and Rita Mary Taylor Denny. (2008). *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast.

Tischler, Linda. (1 Apr. 2004). 'Every Move You Make'. *Fast Company*. Mansueto Ventures LLC, NY. [Retrieved 21 Sept. 2011 from <http://www.fastcompany.com/48949/every-move-you-make>].

'What is Marketing?' (2012). *MarketingTeacher.com*. Marketing Teacher Ltd., UK. [Retrieved 30 April 2012 from <http://marketingteacher.com/lesson-store/lesson-what-is-marketing.html#>].

Pamela Gloria Cajilig is a graduate student at UP Diliman, and also works as a brand strategist and organizational development consultant for both corporations and NGOs. She is co-Founder and Research Director of Curiosity, a design research organization.
Email: pamela.cajilig@gmail.com