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Anthropology and Ethnography: Contributions to Integrated Marketing Communications

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Abstract
This paper explores the ways in which anthropological research, specifically ethnography, can be useful in an Integrated Marketing Communication approach. Starting from a brief description of the different ways in which the discipline of anthropology has studied consumption, the paper turns to review how it can serve effectively to understand both the corporate as well as the consumer culture. Furthermore, the role that the anthropological discipline plays for Integrated Marketing Communication strategies is presented along with some examples of how different firms have used it. This paper is an approach to understanding ethnography not only as a market research methodology, but also as a corporate tool.

Keywords
Market Research, Ethnography, Communication, Consumer Behavior, Consumption, Integrated Marketing Communication

Classification
Viewpoint
If anthropologists were commonly confused with archaeologists, and known for studying tribes in isolated places they are now known for their work in advertising and market research agencies. Studying the ‘Others’ became a matter of understanding ourselves as those others that consume and engage in relationships that are intrinsically linked with the culture that produces them. Anthropologists in marketing observe rather than look at the social phenomena as if they were making evident the obvious. “As academic ethnography has moved more towards the study of modern rather than primitive society, commercial organisations have been interested in its use” (Wilson, 2006, p.99). Anthropologists provide in depth information that will finally serve to built more adequate, accurate and efficient strategies to speak to consumers. The way people behave in daily life is rooted in the way they have been taught culture, that is, the cultural patterns they follow in order to make sense of reality. If consumption is a social process then it can be argued that it can be studied from an anthropological perspective. For more than two decades, anthropology has been increasing its participation in the field of marketing. If it was once a discipline considered only for the academy, it has transcended borders and moved towards the study of consumers not only in a critical way, but also in a theoretical and applied way.

She or he must seek to attain an essentially self-reflexive understanding wherein the ethnographer encounters the forces of his or her own culture, seeking to stand sufficiently distant to conceive its gestalt and sufficiently near to grasp the local minutiae of its detail. (Rosen, 1991, p. 14)

In the academic field, consumer culture theory has explained the phenomenon of consumption as a symbolic and real interchange of meanings that are transmitted and
created in the relations between object-subject, subject-object, subject-subject. The subject, understood as the consumer, entails a relation with an object based on the perceptions hold a-priori about it, while at the same time giving it new and different meanings that will later be interchanged with other consumers. The meanings however, can vary between social groups. People then choose a good or service not only based on the price but also “of the cultural order, of symbolic systems and of classificatory needs” (Rocha and Barros, 2006, P.37, translation of the author).

The marketing-anthropology phenomenon has been studying the fact that people not only consume products, but also ideas and beliefs. The process of consumption goes beyond the acquisition, use and disposal of products (Lury, 1996)(Mendez, 2007). It serves to tell others who we are (Douglas, 1998). Consumption as communication is also about the ways in which we get to know the meanings for those products, ideas and/or beliefs. In the applied field to view consumption as a form of communication (Méndez, 2007) allows us to understand the reasons why consumer culture plays such an important role in today’s world, not only for advertising and market research agencies, but also for the marketing field in general. On one hand, people communicate through the objects they posses. The objects, ideas and beliefs that we consume ultimately communicate to others what we are and what we believe. What we consume classifies us (Rocha and Barros, 2006) (Douglas, 1998). Media creates and communicates meaning that audiences consume and use in their daily lives. Both ways of understanding consumption as a communicative process have served as important insights for marketers to find in anthropology an important tool for reaching consumers and audiences.
But besides the use of anthropology in market and advertising research, anthropology has entered the realm of organizations. The relationships among employees and employers, gender, and the use of space have been some of the studies done inside corporations’ organizational environments. The way a product or service performs in the market is also a result of the environment that produces it. Therefore, to study the inner climate of an organization has also provided a space for conducting ethnographic research.

**Anthropology and Marketing**

For the applied field of anthropology in market research, academic literature has given the basis for a better comprehension of some concepts like ritual (Lury, 1996), desire (Belk *et al.*, 2003), and acculturation in the scope of consumption (Peñaloza, 1994). Anthropologists in this field often rely on academic literature to explain data, to build hypotheses, and to substantiate their analyses. Concepts such as objectification (Miller, 1987), commodification (Jackson, 1999) and semiotics (Keane, 2003) have helped to explain the relations generated by the combination person-object. The study of material culture, mass consumption, semiotics and symbolism have been important in understanding the phenomenon on consumption from a scientific point of view. Research on the relationship between self identity and possessions (Kleine *et al.*, 1995), consumption as a social process (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Miller, 1987; Appadurai, 1997; McCracken, 1986; Miller, 1995; Garcia Canclini, 1995), consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) (Miller, 1995), need (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993), subjective well-being and possessions (Oropesa, 1995), recognition of consumption symbolism (Belk *et al.*, 2003), and...
are examples of research done in the field of anthropology, consumer culture studies, and marketing.

Not completely applied, but not completely academic, most of the anthropologists working in market research have an academic background that allows them to have a complimentary view of the group under study. Using academic theories and reading scholars, they are able to explain the data collected in fieldwork to later translate it into terms their client will understand.

The importance of the input of the social sciences in the marketing discipline can be found in studies that date to the 1950s (Miller, 1967). During the 1940s and 1950s Social Research Inc. “provided organizational consulting as well as consumer research for advertising agencies and companies” (Sunderland and Denny, 2007, p.28), and was influenced by the University of Chicago. During the 1940s, qualitative techniques had to establish themselves as valuable research methods when quantitative research provided statistical significance (Mariampolski, 2001). In the 1960s Leo Burnett incorporated “ethnographic thinking” into consumer research with a study for the Kellogg trademark (Sunderland and Denny, 2007, p. 27).

The arena shifted from one in which ‘ethnography’ was an esoteric term and as a mode of research was only rarely commissioned, to one where ethnography has become so commonplace that virtually every company offering qualitative consumer research has had to incorporate ethnographic work into the toolkit in one fashion or another (Sunderland and Denny, 2007, p. 13)

Mariampolski (2001) explains in detail the history of the inclusion of qualitative techniques in the industry, naming its emergence in the scope of the Second World War. The author argues that during that period focus groups were used in order to enhance communication and mobilization efforts of the fonts (p. 10). Later on, these techniques will provide important information from consumers about consumer goods. With the
increasing reach and importance of mass media, the quality of the messages became a priority in a world that was becoming more competitive. Mariampolski continues his exposition by arguing that the different revolutions that took place in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged marketers to reach the diverse groups of consumers in more innovative ways.

The eighties and nineties were decades of new technological advances which produced new markets. “Ethnography got a big boost in 1998 with an influential Saatchi and Saatchi study called ‘Digital Kids’… The company has even hires an archaeologist to unearth consumer insights” (p. 102).

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed how media started to write about anthropologists in business (Sunderland and Denny, 2007)(Langebaek Rueda, 2006). More and more anthropologists became important team members in organizations even though the value of anthropology in business was not a new concept. Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 416) mention other studies like Nichols and Beynon (1977) and their study of workers in a British multinational firm, Collison (1992) and Dalton’s (1959) studies of corporate culture and organizational environment, and Marshall (1984) and Jackall (1988) with their studies of gender relations inside organizations. It is important to note however, that even if this trend developed in the United States and the United Kingdom, anthropology in marketing is starting to become strong in technologically developing countries.

The past decades have not only witnessed an exponential increase in the type of products and services, but also an increase in the information that the consumer receives and chooses. The offer of communication services also increased the possibilities of what might be consumed. The consumer therefore, not only has the ability to choose what to consume, but also how to do it (Méndez, 2007). “Consumers are gravitating toward
media with content that is most relevant and interesting to them . . . The challenge for marketers . . . is to [italics added] incorporate marketing messages into the audience’s lifestyles without being a distraction” (Misloski, 2005, p. 18).

Marketing has turned into a science of going out to the consumers and telling them in interesting, innovative and overall appropriate terms what they want to hear. Such an increase in the offer of products and services requires more competitiveness on behalf of the companies. Better access to information and a wide variety of products and brands make it more difficult for a product to perform in the market. The key to success is information. “There is no doubt that focus on ‘experiential marketplaces’ (Disney to Nike Town to ESPN Zone to Starbucks) spurred marketing managers and advertising researchers to consider new models and alternative methods of research” (Sunderland and Denny, 2007, p. 26).

**Ethnography and Integrated Marketing Communications**

IMC has been defined as a strategic process (Kliatchko, 2008); a same message communicated through different channels to produce one same result. The effect of this approach consists, as the name indicates, in integrating different entities into working together to achieve a goal. This goal can be thought of in two ways. The first one is to produce and deliver a message to audiences/consumers. The second one is to make this message effective in generating an attitude in the audience/consumer. This clustering of channels into one same goal implies that a strong connection between the different communication entities should be build.

We propose to understand communication channels as all the communication processes that occur between the client, marketing agencies, product, and consumer
inside a specific socio-cultural environment. Since the relation between subject-object is possible because of cultural patterns, communication is the bridge that brings them together. If IMC is about relationships (Madhavaram et al., 2005), then ethnography in IMC can be defined as the understanding of those relationships. After all, “at the heart of IMC research is a better understanding of how—and in what way the combining, aligning, and integrating of marketing communication improves or enhances current marketing communication approaches” (Schultz, 2005, p.7).

Two types of relationships are identified inside IMC settings: one that works to produce and deliver a message, and one that generates an attitude in the consumer. In both relationships the inputs provided by ethnography can be seen. In the first relationship, ethnography serves as strategy to understand the corporate culture of the different companies involved in the production and delivery of a message. This type or organization-oriented ethnography has often been referred to “marketing ethnography” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484). In the second relationship, ethnography serves as the tool to make the message and the product closer to the consumer, by using in-depth information gathered from consumers or audiences. This type consumer-oriented ethnography is also known as “market-oriented ethnography” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484).

It is important to keep in mind that even if these two types or relationships seem different they work together in order to achieve the product/service’s success in the market. Therefore, ethnography acts as a tool in the connection between the corporate culture and the consumer (Take in Figure 1) (Figure 1).
Anthropological research is based on the assumption that in order to understand the other you have to speak his language. Under this assumption speaking the language of the other is not only matter of communication but also of anthropological inquiry due to the fact that in order to communicate properly it is necessary to understand the reasons that underlie such processes of communication. The idea then, is to view the “social world through the eyes of the people that the [ethnographers] study” (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.416). Speaking the same language of the consumer and of other components of the corporate culture is communicating more effectively with them (Goetz and Barger, 2008). Ethnography allows us to understand in the consumer the processes behind “having, doing and being” (Belk, 1988, p. 139).

**Ethnography**

It can be said that the strategic synchronization of messages should be based on previous information in order to communicate a message that is closer to the consumer. If IMC is about integrating channels, in-depth information may help by conveying more coherent messages and building more appropriate strategies.

IMC business process begins and develops from a deep understanding of target audiences as a guiding principle in arriving at marketing and branding objectives and strategies….The focus IMC gives to the demand chain of the business process aims to strategically manage the total customer experience by understanding customer needs, wants, desires and behavior in the marketplace, and align the entire organization to meet those customer requirements (Kliatchko, 2008 p. 143)

For IMC the benefits gained from ethnographical research are not only a way to know why a consumer uses certain products, but also a way to improve communication messages (advertising planning), communication channels (media planning), sales and promotions (marketing strategies), and distribution channels (Point of purchase strategies). Anthropological research is able to answer questions about all these different
strategies that ultimately look forward to making an effective Integrated Marketing Communications campaign keeping in mind the importance of understanding more profoundly the consumer and the corporate culture.

Ethnography consists of the immersion of the researcher into the environment under study in order to gain important insights that would serve to gain more information about the particular group under study. As Rosen (1991) argues, “the task of the researcher is to describe and analyze the world from the perspective of those involved with its performance” (p. 6). Using different types of research tools, anthropologists are able to recognize the ways in which cultural patterns, rituals and beliefs shape attitudes and behaviors. These so-called insights are information that will later be transformed into different types of strategies. No wonder it has been gaining importance over the years among clients of marketing firms (Suri and Howard, 2006) for different categories of products (Belk, 1982).

Ethnography is about understanding. To describe and understand in timely manners is of central concern for anthropologists working in business environments. Ethnographers use rapid assessment procedures to provide insightful information. “Ethnography aims to explicate patterns of action that are cultural and/or social rather than cognitive” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 485). In this field, culture has been defined as a public space (Arnould and Price, 2006) where meanings are produced, shared and reproduced; the realm of lifestyle (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Culture “is the foundation of a worldview and value system . . . which gives meaning to people’s concept of self and their roles in daily life” (Mariampolski, 2006, p. 6).
Five main objectives can be mentioned about ethnographic research. It is important to note that these are not exhaustive. The first is to make evident the obvious, which means make us aware of what people do but they don’t know they do. As was mentioned before, people tell what they rationally believe to be true. The anthropologist’s work is to uncover those facts that seem trivial, but that can become powerful insights.

The second goal is to analyze in depth the dynamics of appropriation and consumption of ideas and objects. To understand how people appropriate products an/or ideas helps us comprehend the role that products play in people’s daily lives as well as the channels of communication people use to get informed about those products. In the case of labor environment, ethnography serves to understand the way people perceive the corporate culture and the attachment to the organization. According to Bryman and Bell (2007), “Rosen (1991) understands organizational ethnography to be distinctive because it is concerned with social relations that are related to certain goal-directed activities… Ethnography has provided researchers with an obvious method for understanding work organizations as cultural entities” (pg. 441).

As a third goal it is important to mention how ethnography helps marketers speak to their audiences in their own terms, that is, how to communicate with them more effectively using the audiences’ particular forms of communication. Such understanding however, should be from an emic perspective (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), that is, from the perspective of the group under study rather than from the perspective of the corporations. To achieve this, researchers prefer to use the voice of the consumer in the form of verbatim for their presentations to clients. The usage of certain language can change the perception that a consumer has about a certain issue.
The fourth goal of ethnography is to identify needs, wants, lifestyles and desires. If we understand how the group under study perceives reality, as well as its aspirations, motivations, and expectations, we can better address such group not only with the development or improvement of a certain issue, but also by the understanding the channels of communication. This understanding will allow corporations to communicate with the group under study more effectively and efficiently. Knowing where our the target groups stand and where they want to be will help us focus the strategy in a more appropriate and close ways either as marketers or as human resource managers.

Finally, the fifth goal of ethnography is to describe specific socio-cultural environments, in particular, the environment of the audience corporations want to address, be it the consumer or its corporate culture. The importance of this goal relies in the fact that it allows to have a detailed description of the environment of the group under study. This information is crucial for understanding choices, modus – vivendi, and distribution of income; in other words it gives a picture of the group under study’s environment that helps organizations to decide where, how and when to address such group. It is important to understand the corporate culture as “miniature societies” that behave in specific ways (Allaire and Firsirotu, 1984, p. 193). Two implications that derive from this issue are: the demand for communication that approaches the group under study in more innovative and close ways, and strategies that match not only the real and symbolic needs and desires of the people but also go along with their real life dynamics.

To achieve these goals, anthropologists use different qualitative techniques such as participant observation, direct observation, visual media, journals, and interviewing
among others. Various researchers have addressed the uses that are given to ethnography nowadays. Among them are the design of new products or services, retail and architectural design and organization. Their techniques include mystery shopping (Mariampolski, 2006), cool-hunting (Schor, 2004)(Klein, 1999), identification of consumption practices (Peñaloza, 1994), product evaluation (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), lifestyle habits (Neveril, 2008) and market segmentation (Cousineau and Scurry, 2008) such as kids, teens, and “tweens”(Schor, 2004; Klein, 1999; Cousineau and Scurry, 2008). As Schor (2004) describes it, coolness is now “revered as a universal quality – something every product tries to be and every kid needs to have. Marketers have defined cool as the key to social success, as what matters for determining who belongs, who’s popular, and who gets accepted by peers” (p. 47).

Ethnography is also being used in the entertainment industry, which is interested in gathering more information about their different audiences in order to produce shows that are able to portray their audiences’ realities and therefore engagement.

Not only is the customer or prospect the nucleus and constant reference point for the development of an IMC plan, the customer today is fully empowered to take absolute control of the content he or she desires to receive and create. In this era of personal media, audiences are no longer just receivers of media content but are simultaneously creators” (Kliatchko, 2008, p. 148).

Literature about ethnography in marketing makes reference to the usage of the two types of ethnographic research: one that studies the social processes inside the organizational environment known as “ethnography of marketing” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484) and other that studies consumer culture known also as “market-oriented ethnography” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p.484), “corporate-ethnography” (Suri and Howard, 2006, p. 246), or “commercial ethnography” (Rocha and
Barros, 2006, p.41). It is important to mention these two approaches for purposes of explaining the importance of ethnography today specially for Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC).

**Market oriented ethnography**

Aware of the importance of gathering conclusive and in-depth information about consumers, marketers continuously refer to quantitative and qualitative data. Marketers want to understand symbolic systems that underlie behaviors (Kozinets, 2002), in other words why people do what they do and like what they like. Quantitative market research has been for a long time one of the preferred ways that companies have to gather information. Not only does it give statistically significant numbers that approach a tentative representative-ness of the overall population, but also the costs of developing them with a large sample are lower than those incurred in qualitative research, especially for ethnographical research. However, quantitative research seems to run short when it comes to understanding the final results of the analyses. What reasons underlie the answers people gave in the survey? “Studying and interpreting the subjective experiences of the market segments served by specific marketing programs is a useful step in establishing enduring, effective exchange relationships (Denzin, 1989) and an organizationwide market orientation” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484).

Traditional qualitative market research methodologies have tried to explain consumer behavior, addressing the whys that underlie the selection not only of products but also of channels of information. Mobile marketing in Japan is a good example of the importance of understanding the channels that people use in their daily lives to communicate. Not only does it reduce the costs for the client, but also it is more
convenient in time and in addressing the specific audience that the brand wants (Fujita, 2008).

Although traditional market research techniques provide important insights into understanding how consumers think, marketers have realized that sometimes the information provided by in-depth interviews and focus groups “failed to produce the depth of insight and consumer understanding” (Mariampolski, 2006, p.13) One of the reasons both marketers and companies give to explain this issue is the fact that the interviewed is taken out of his/her daily environment (Kozinets, 2002); that is, he/she has to cut a routine.

Also, in face-to-face interactions between researcher and interviewed this last uses rational answers to respond to rational questions based on what he/she believes to be true. As Dumas (2007) comments, “It’s not that people are lying to us in focus groups or in-depth interviews. On the contrary, they’re trying to help us, and that’s where the trouble starts. They’re trying to figure out what is it we need to know and give us the right answer” (p. 27). Also, consumers are not always aware of what they do on a daily basis (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994); they will answer based on what they believe they do, and this beliefs may not necessarily correspond to what they actually do (Méndez, 2007). To make evident the obvious means to become aware of those things that we may do in our daily lives but that we are not aware we do.

“Ethnography is effectively used in marketing when little is known about a targeted market or when fresh insights are desired about a segment or consumer-related behavior” (Mariampolski, 2006, p.3). Although the biases that a researcher produces are inevitable, ethnography manages to make the researcher a temporary component of the
consumer’s daily life. “The method is ideally suited to shine a bright light on the gaps between what people say and what they actually do, capturing experience in action” (Dumas, 2007, p. 27).

Today, methodologies that derive from ethnography are widely used in the industry. Such is the case of cool-hunting and recruiting. The second one consists in the recruitment of a member of the group under study who is trained in research techniques, so that he/she can collect data from the social group to which he/she belongs (Shor, 2004). Other forms of contemporary research are autoethnography (Bryman and Bell, 2007), and mapping (Mariampolski, 2006).

**Marketing ethnography**

Inside a company, marketing ethnography refers to the study of organizational processes; that is, how the internal culture of a company works, organizational values and competences. Ethnography then is performed inside companies in order to understand the relationships between workers, managers and executives to create or modify the organizational climate in working relations. For IMC, this type of research could be interesting for finding gaps between production, design, marketing and the selling force. Ethnography is a useful tool for improving organizational communication by evaluating channels of communication among the different areas and departments inside a company, and why not communication among companies.

A good example of the use of ethnography inside corporations is presented by Grow (2008). In the study about the development of the Nike feminine sub-brand advertising campaign from the creative’s team point of view, conflict was the common denominator along years of work between the client and the agency. The feminine sub-
brand campaign was thought of for the client as threatening the parent brand; while for the creative team the campaign was a way to empower women. The conflict escalated becoming a matter of interest between sex genders, due to the fact that the creative team was composed mainly of women. The communication between the client and the creative team was not appropriate. There was not a common ground of understanding between both parties. As the author notes, “dissonance and hostility create organizational conflicts, which in this case are expressed within the communicative process of advertising.

Mariampolsky (2006) identifies some areas in which ethnography gives support in dealing with corporate cultures, these are: Integration of subgroups, workflow and adoption of new technologies, productivity, adaptation to change, corporate social responsibility and merging of corporate enterprises (p. 30). This last, is of interest to IMC due to the fact that it addresses issues related to working with different corporate cultures (Ratnatunga and Ewing, 2005) as IMC looks forward to achieve. The processes that underlie such organization of tasks, as well as the processes not only economic but also of labor relations inside the companies give valuable information that can be used by the IMC manager to built more stable relations, not only inside the corporation, but also with its customers, that is, consumers.

Ethnographic approaches are useful in studying the internal operations of corporate units, employee groups, and commercial environments . . . Corporate cultures define the ways companies think about customers: as objects to be manipulated, with mistrust, or as valued partners . . . Corporate cultures have an impact on a variety of issues that are essential to the profitability and success of the enterprise (Mariampolski, 2006, p. 30)

Kliatchko (2008), defines IMC as “an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels, and results of brand
communication programs” (p.140). The author underlines the addition of the word *content* to this definition, arguing that content “induces persuasion in communication, and in turn causes behavioral effects on the target audience” (Kliatchko, 2008, p. 140).

The importance of the addition of the concept of *content* to the definition of IMC is that it includes a qualitative component which in fact can be researched and evaluated by ethnography. This qualitative component places emphasis on the addition of the importance of the consumer in the IMC definition. Kliatchko (2008) has identified four pillars of IMC, to which we have added the use of ethnography in each stage noted by italics (*Take in Figure II*). *Figure II* shows how these entities interact with each other to produce communication strategies. If we think of ethnography as the information platform that gives us more insights about the consumers, we can see the inputs from ethnography.

In this figure, we can see the two approaches of ethnographic research done in IMC. One approach moves towards the understanding of the integration of the corporate culture, stakeholders. On the other hand but complementary, we see the market oriented ethnographic research approach that seeks to comprehend content and channels in terms of the target audience, that is, in the language of the consumer in a consumer-centric approach. All of this will finally build a strategic management of brand communications programs based on the in-depth information about the consumer and the corporate culture. As it was said before, IMC is based on relationships.

IMC is a relationship between the marketing entities based on a consumer-centric approach; “a multistage model incorporating a focus on all contacts with consumers, as well as notions about market research, database marketing, and corporate reorganization
to focus on the needs of the consumer rather than the marketer (Schultz and Kitchen, 1997)” (Swain, 2004, p.46).

**Getting closer**

Some authors recognize that IMC establishes a dialogue (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005) between the different agents in organizations, whether clients or other organizations. The importance of this dialogue relies on the kind of information that the parties are trying to communicate. For this dialogue it is important to have a good understanding of the system, as well as of the channels in which the message is going to be communicated. The consumers’ help is very important into building relationships with the product and the brand, that is, building equity (Blackston, 2000). Consumers will not only allow us to identify needs, wants and aspirations but also the environments in which they desire and feel. If the brand communication is encapsulated in this environment and speaks the same language as the consumer, then IMC is more prone to efficiency. If there is a message being conveyed in different channels and such message has positive outcomes among the audience, then the brand is more prone to building a stronger equity; after all, the interactions that consumers experience with the brand create perceptions of it (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005).

Communication channels are based on a double side relationship that ultimately come together to a consumer centric approach. *(Take in Figure III)* The dashed arrows in Figure III signify the field of “ethnography of marketing” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484) while the complete arrows represent the approach taken by “market oriented ethnography” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484) in order to identify communication channels with consumers. Note that the product is separated from the
client, due to the fact that the relationship that the consumer establishes with the client (or
the company/brand) is not necessarily the same that is established with the product.
While the consumer may establish a rational or emotional relation with the brand
(evaluating the brand’s performance, for example), the relationship established with the
product may contain performance attributes that may affect the product *per se* but not
necessarily the brand. In other words a brand is not the same as the product, and this is
precisely one of the components of the definition of brand equity (Blackston, 2000).
Consumers may acquire a product not only for its performance, but also for the
emotional attachments that such product or brand generates in them. While developing
ethnographical research among housewives in a middle class income house in Bogota
(Colombia), it was observed how certain practices that include certain brands are passed
from generation to generation. The brand was used in performing certain practices and it
was not subject to change. When asked about changing such brand, the housewife
immediately replied with a negative, referring to the product’s performance attributes to
justify her decision. However, it was observed that other products will have a same or
even better performance than the one she already used. The usage of such a brand then,
was a matter of not only performance and personal taste but also of custom. The brand
reminded her of her mother and her childhood; the product was part of her routine as a
little girl, and her mother had particular ways of packing it and preparing it, which she
carefully explained to the researcher. This practice however, was not specific to her
family; other families in her social group did the same. Changing the brand or even
changing the package of the brand was like altering her past and her future. Marketers
can get into the minds of consumers with good performance, but into their hearts with
good communication. Ethnography is the first door to get to their hearts.

Some examples of brands that have shown the importance of what has been called
the Top of Heart by marketers are Crest and Method. In the case of Crest they made the
brand closer to consumers by fomenting a dialogue between the consumer and the brand.
“The brand has created an internal culture [italics added] that seeks innovation in
marketing communication, which allows it to consistently anticipate new opportunities
and ways to connect with the consumer [italics added]” (Johnson, 2005, p. 25). The
Method brand is another example of getting to the hearts of consumers through an IMC
approach in two ways: through an organizational approach and a consumer centered
approach. It is possible that Method conducted prior qualitative research of their target
audience. Being environmentally friendly, minimalist and sophisticated, having a good
performance, and good communication (with copies such as “You may not know what
your tile tastes like, but your kid does” (Gugajew, 2008)), show how Method approached
both the brain and the heart of the consumer. If we want to satisfy consumers we have to
understand them better in their different communication channels. The platform for a
schematic brand equity strategy relies in knowing not only what goes on in the
organizational and marketing environment, but also in the real life of consumers
(Madhavaram et al., 2005).

Applying ethnography

The ethnographic approach has been gaining strength among marketing agencies
with an IMC approach. BBDO Worldwide is an example of this. Their understanding of
IMC has lead them to be one of the top agencies in the world. They are part of Omnicom
Group Inc., which is a group of “branded networks and numerous specialty firms that provide advertising, strategic media planning and buying, digital and interactive, direct and promotional marketing, public relations and other specialty communications” (BBDO, 2007). In 2006, BBDO conducted ethnographic research in 26 countries to find out the different rituals people get involved in on a daily basis. They defined ritual as the moment in which the individual changes from one emotional state to another. Taking your shoes off when you get back home after work is an example of this.

“The idea here is to look at rituals as an important behavior in consumers' lives, to understand what they are, how they work, and how to work our clients' brands into them. We usually look at behavior through the lens of a brand or a category. This is an extra lens to look through. Not an alternative.” (BBDO, 2007)

This type of research helped marketers to understand and classify in a big scale qualitative approach the rituals that people usually engage in. The results show not only what activities do people perform, but also which sources of information people use in different daily activities. Results also showed which product do people use on a daily basis and how do they combine them. These are important insights to promotion agencies. This type of information helps discover different communication channels; it is information that will not only serve the advertising agency per se but also other companies involved in the marketing mix.

Young & Rubicam is also known for the usage of thick descriptions (a detailed ethnographic description) (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Ogilvy and Mather (Schor, 2004)(Dumas, 2007), has a specialized group called the Discovery Group for qualitative research. Also, there are important and specialized ethnographic research agencies that work not only for brands and corporate groups but also for all the agencies inside the marketing mix. Clients that have used this type of research include Levi’s Jeans (Schor,
2004), Fischer-Price (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), and DHL (Dumas 2007) among many others. “The essence of the IMC, movement is a call to make marketing communication more effective through greater tactical coordination and a strong brand strategy that is driven by customer feedback data” (Dewhirst and Davis, 2005, p.82).

To look for new methodologies in different communication spaces is the challenge of today’s ethnography. The new interactive spaces of communication as well as digital media are pushing for new ways of doing research online (blogs, discussion groups, and podcasts among others) and in personal media (mp3, mp4, mobile communication, among others) (Kliatchko, 2008). Netnography (ethnography in online spaces) has been proposed for this type of research, especially with online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Looking for more interactive ways to communicate with consumer is a priority of market researchers today. Finding those interactive channels serve to communicate new messages in new and closer term to the audience.

In this global era, companies have the need to understand better a multicultural audience and to adapt themselves to the different environments in which they are entering. IMC is a strategy towards which many companies around the globe are moving because of the advantages it presents. A multicultural understanding of audiences is crucial to these processes. Ethnographic research is, then, an important tool to be incorporated inside the IMC agenda. Anthropology not only offers the possibility of understanding western consumers but also other type of consumers; after all that is its essence.
References


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Figure I

Corporate Culture

Production of symbolic codes and needs
Consumer

Market-Oriented Ethnography

Marketing Ethnography

Production & Delivery

Message

Consumption & Adoption
Figure II

Figure 1: Four pillars of IMC

Source: (Kliatchko 2008, p. 145) [italics added].

Figure III

Communication channel relations

In this graphic, each arrow represents a communication channel relationship built between the different organizations inside the marketing mix. All these relationships are inside culture, which shapes and reshapes such relationships (represented by the circular arrow).