A MAURITIAN'S QUALITATIVE BRAND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH JOURNEY IN THE UK: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Qualitative approaches to cross-cultural marketing communication research are usually recommended when the researcher lacks familiarity with the foreign environment under investigation (Malhotra et al. 1996, Burton 2009). Many qualitative researchers have shared their rich personal experiences of performing cross-cultural research in different cultural settings which have contributed to rich insights in the field of qualitative cross-cultural marketing-related research that is growing in importance in this postmodern era of increasing cross-culturality (Liamputtong 2010, Wang 2012). In this paper, the perspective of a Mauritian qualitative researcher considering himself as a "product of cross-cultural identity" (Liamputtong 2010, p. ix) and originating from a "polyethnic island state" (Erisksen 1994, p. 549) is offered. The fieldwork involved in-depth qualitative interviewing of a sample population of elderly White British females living with arthritis as part of a study on charity brand communication. Discussion in this paper focusses on some specific cross-cultural issues relating to context familiarity, researcher-participant rapport and cultural representation. This paper is likely to be of particular interest to qualitative researchers of Asian and other cultural backgrounds envisaging cross-cultural marketing communication research for the first time in a British context. It is also argued that the issues raised might also be of relevance to cross-cultural qualitative research involving in-depth interviewing in an Asian context.

Keywords : brand communication, cross-cultural communication, branding, global communication

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Background

This paper provides draws upon the personal account of a Mauritian researcher conducting qualitative research among a White elderly female audience in the UK. In this postmodern era of qualitative research, it is nowadays acknowledged that the experience of qualitative researchers with different cultural backgrounds would provide different voices to issues related to qualitative methodologies in different cultural contexts. Therefore, I felt that the perspective of a novice qualitative researcher from a cross-cultural background would contribute to the body of literature in discussing issues relating to brand communication research from a cross-cultural perspective. There are several definitions and intrepretations of the term cross-cultural in marketing research (Malhotra et al. 1996) but in this paper, I will use the term cross-cultural research as a situation where the researcher is conducting research in a cultural context that is different from his own. Therefore, I will share my experience as a researcher from the island of Mauritius conducting qualitative research in a British context for the first time.

Context of study

I arrived for the first time in the UK in June 2010 after being recruited as a postgraduate researcher to conduct a study related to charity brand communication in the UK commisioned by a national healthcare charity in the UK invoved with helping people living with arthritis. An increasing number of charities have been involved in branding initiatives during recent years (Stride 2006) and many have realised the importance of branding as a means to "communicating value and meaning" (Hankinson 2001, p. 231). Several high-profile charities in the UK embarked on branding strategies in the 1990s with the result of improving their brand image in the country

(Bennett and Gabriel 2003) and attracting more funding from donors (Hankinson 2001). The aim of this research project was to understanding the different ways beneficiaries related to the charity through a brand relationship lens. The project started during a period where the organisation was facing several challenges, especially with regards to income generation. Several managerial measures were taken to face these difficulties, and top management stressed the importance to communicate effectively. There was a felt need of raising the awareness of the charity and its services in the country, and ensuring that its identity and image were aligned. There was also a concern about new entrants in the sector providing similar services which could become potential threats in the future, since they were smaller charities with more focused service delivery. Understanding how branding could be beneficial to the charity in these times of uncertainty and change was felt to be of crucial importance.

The main theoretical framework that guided this study was the consumer-brand relationship typology developed by (Fournier 1998) who attempted to provide a "framework for characterizing and better understanding the types of relationships consumers form with brands" (p.343). Her study investigated consumer-brand relationships "at the level of felt experiences" (Fournier 1998, p.347) and consequently a typology of brand relationship was proposed consisting of fifteen relationship types: arranged marriages, casual friendships/buddies, marriages of convenience, committed partnerships, best friendships, compartmentalized friendships, kinships, rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships, childhood friendships, courtships, dependencies, flings, enmities, secret affairs, and enslavements. The brand relationship metaphor lies on the assumption that people perceive the relationship that they have with brands as analogous to that formed with human beings (Fournier 1998). These interpersonal relationship metaphors are an extension of the brand personality metaphor previously used in the

branding literature: "if brands have personalities we can treat them as people; if they are people then we can have relationships with them" (Patterson and O'Malley 2006, p.10). This notion of brand personality has also been explored in the non-profit context and several studies have demonstrated that people ascribe personality traits to charities (Venable et al. 2003, Sargeant et al. 2008a, Voeth and Herbst 2008, Hou et al. 2009). Therefore, this study was aimed at exploring the extent to which interpersonal relationship metaphors could be used to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of relationships formed between the charity brand and its beneficiaries. The brand relationship lens would emphasize the "life worlds of consumers rather than measuring the mere brand-consumer transactions" (Heding et al. 2009, p.176).

Researcher Background

The background of the researcher is an important aspect that influences the way qualitiative research is conducted and interpreted (Cooper and White 2011) and is even more salient when research is being conducted in a cross-cultural context. I was born in 1976 in a "polyethnic island state" (Erisksen 1994, p. 549) which has historically consisted of a mixed population originating from India, Africa, China and Europe (Fregel et al. 2014). The island of Mauritius was a former French and British colony and English and French are still the main administrative languages used. I was raised in the multicultural town of Rose-Hill in a family of three children. My father was a primary school teacher who laid a lot of emphasis on the learning of both English and French from an early age apart from our mother tongue Creole. I learned English since primary school and have always spoken English with a slight French accent, which I consider as a major part of my cultural identity. I consider myself as a "product of cross-cultural identity" (Liamputtong 2010, p. ix) due to the fact

that culturally I have been influenced by different cultures prevailing on the island.

Research journey

This study was approached from a social constructionist perspective under the main tenet that "all meaningful accounts of the real world are mediated by the social contexts in which such accounts are constructed" (Pfohl 2008, p.645). This implies that the meaning that people have of their life worlds are influenced by the social relationships that they have, hence "the individual's cultural milieu and group affiliations provide them with lenses through which they view relationships, themselves, and others and endow them meaning" (Koro-Ljunberg 2008, p.434). The strategy of inquiry that I used was that of an interpretive bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln 2003) where specific data collection techniques were modified as research progressed on the field and were adapted to the context of the study. An inductive approach was mainly adopted for this study, which allowed for a co-creation of meaning to happen through the researcher-participant interaction (Kvale 1996). Emphasis was placed on giving voice to participants, who were considered as what Gioia et al. (2013) referred to as "knowledge agents" (p. 17) or people who "know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions and actions" (p.17). Such an inductive approach also allowed me to encouraged participants to use interpersonal metaphors to express themselves, and sometimes the researcher used such metaphors in discussions hence adopting both the 'researcher metaphor' and 'consumer metaphor' approaches (Avis et al. 2012). After experimenting with several interview techniques, I decided to favour the use of in-depth dramaturgical interviews due to its "very fluid and flexible format for conducted research interviews" (Berg 2007, p. 116) based on a conversational model of interviewing (Kvale 1996).

In this paper, I will be sharing my reflections on the experience of interviewing White British women from different parts of the UK. There were various issues encountered during the data collection process but I will focus my discussion here on context familiarity, researcher-participant rapport and cultural representation.

Context Familiarity

In her account of her research journey among Somali immigrants in an urban American city, Oikonomidoy (2009) mentioned the value of social interactions in "extra-research spaces" at the exploratory phase of the reseach process. Australian-born female researcher Gresham (2012) also emphasized on this aspect in her study among Saudi female students in Australia. I also realised the importance of such extra-research social interactions in the exploratory phase in order to initiate interest and potentially meet people that would fit the required participant profile. In my particular case, I decided that I had to attend regional branch meetings not only to recruit participants, but also to get a feel of the social and cultural milieu of the people who were members of the charity's regional branches. Branch visits also allowed me to discuss informally with different people at grassroots level. I felt that being direclty involved in the community life of the participants allowed me to better understand the social and culural context of the participants. The observations made during those activities were invaluable and added more depth to my understanding of the issue. I also noted that such participation was also a way for me to break stereo-types on both sides. For instance, may of the events I attended was mostly consisted of an elderly White population and I felt that there was at times a reticence from some people to engage with me because they were not just used to have an Asian young-looking guy attending such events. However, I made an extra effort to interact with a maximum number of

people and through this I manage to convince a few of them to participate in the research by scheduling an interview with them at an ulterior date. I believe that when conducting research in a different cultural context, the researcher need to make an extra effort to interact in a casual manner with potential respondents in what Oikonomidoy (2009) described as "extra-research spaces". For instance, I initiated contact with people during the branch meetings coffee breaks or by hanging out after the meeting or helping with cleaning tasks. I also participated in a charity walk where I chatted with the walkers and even helped them in taking their pictures. Therefore, when planning a qualitative research mission in a different country, the researcher should plan for spending time in non-research related social interactions to familiarise with the research context and subsequently build rapport with participants. This would allow for a better understanding of the social context, a better way to build rapport with potential participants and also an opportunity to recruit participants with diverse demographic and psychographic profiles.

Researcher-Participant Rapport

Developing rapport has been acknowledged as a sensible issue in qualitative research and researchers need to "initiate a rapport-building process from their first encounter with a participant in order to build a research relationship that will allow the researcher to access the person's story" (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007, p.331). This becomes even more salient when the researcher is from a different cultural background. I felt that it was important for me to develop a connection with the participant first before probing into the main themes to be discussed. I personally used various tactics to facilitate my rapport with the target audience. Firstly, I needed to emphasize on the fact that I was a visiting scholar from Mauritius so I could benefit from all the positives associations that

potential participants would have about the island and its people. I also used one of my nicknames 'Teo' to make it easier for the target audience to related to me since my real Arabic name 'Tauheed' might not only be unfamiliar to them but also might give rise to undesirable associations. I also think that my Mauritian accent contributed in building rapport with the respondents since I found out that participants tended to like the accent I was using as illustrated in the quote below:

I love they way he says "foreigners," so French. English people find a French accent quite attractive. I don't think the French find it the same way for us.

I feel that in some cases, participants volunteered to be interviewed because they were also interested to know more about my cultural background. The fact that I was from Mauritius contributed in facilitating in connecting with some of the participants.

I also realised quickly that the most important aspect of the research was to be able to initiate a conversation with the participant and to adapt accordingly. As far as possible, I tried to conduct face-to-face interviews in the houses of the participants. However on a few cases, interviews were conducted at the location that was chosen by the respondent. One interview was conducted in a pub, one in a museum café, and one in a bookshop café. I realised that given the age range of the participants, some of them might be reticent to have a 'stranger' in their house so when I initiate contact with them, I did not impose that the interview needed to take place in their houses. I gave them the option to choose the place of interview – a place where they would feel comfortable. Locations were selected in mutual consultation whereby participants were told to choose a place where recordings could be made without too much ambient sound. When on location, both parties looked for a quiet spot so as not to be disturbed during the interview. In some cases, I had to consider Skype interviews as a substitute to face-to-face interviews. This was a particularly interesting experience and was a good substitute for face-to-face interviews. In some

cases, participants even moved the camera around to show me their natural environment. It was another way of getting into the intimate surrounding of the participant without physically being there. However, this is more likely to happen if time has been devoted to build a connection with the participant prior to the actual interview.

Cultural Representation

The notion of cultural representation was also another theme that emerged from my cross-cultural reflection on data collection. The term representation is used here as the creation of meaning through the use of language and visual symbols (Hall 1997). Language would include the use of words and metaphors by respondents since I purposely encouraged them to do so given my research approach. Metaphors and metaphoric transfer have been used extensively in marketing theory (Hunt and Menon 1995) and it has acknowledged that this has helped in communicating complex issues (O'Malley and Tynan 1999). I encouraged participants to use interpersonal metaphors to express themselves, and sometimes I used such metaphors in discussions with participants hence adopting both the researcher metaphor and consumer metaphor approaches (Avis et al. 2012). Metaphors were proposed as a heuristic to facilitate understanding and explanation of relationship dimensions identified (Avis et al. 2012) based on insights gathered from the perspective of beneficiaries. However, there could be issues in the use and interpretation of metaphors and metaphoric transfer in a cross-cultural context where the researcher might have a different interpretation of the same metaphor used due to differences in cultural background. In his critique of the use of interpersonal relationship metaphor in brand research, Bengtsson (2003) argued that "to say one loves objects, activities, and ideas, is relatively widespread in the American society and

is distinct from the way the word 'love' is used in many other cultures where the concept has a more restricted applicability" (p. 156). I came across this situation during my research journey whereby I found that words such as love or hate could be used and interpreted by my participants in a way that was different from my own interpretation. Therefore the use of such metaphors in marketing research could give rise to interpretation issues not only when used in different cultural contexts but also when a researcher from a different cultural context would be using a word or a metaphoric expression with someone from a different cultural context or vice-versa.

Other issues identified in relation to use of language are those relating to accent and transciption. While Choi (2012) noted that scant attention has been given to translation issues as well as the relationship between translator and researcher, I found that there has not been enough attention given in the literature to accent and transcription problems. Before I came to the UK, I thought that most people spoke English with the Received Pronounciation (RP) – an accent that I have been exposed to by some of my English teachers or by certain British news channels via satellite broadcast and the Internet. The RP accent is one that is "probably the most widely studied and most frequently described variety of spoken English in the world" (British Library 2014). However, the reality was that only a minority of people in the UK spoke with this kind of accent - only 2% of the population according to recent studies (British Library 2014). I also found that there were several accents which I needed to familiarise myself with, especially accents from the Northern part of the country. To minimise isssues of language and accent, I decided to hire a native English speaker to transcribe the interviews. However, I found that even as a native English speaker, she also had certain difficulties in understanding some terms used. Therefore, I found myself having to hire another transcriber that would be familiar with all the British accents that were in use at that time. Therefore Asian

and non-British researchers who might have learned English as a foreign language with an RP accent need to bear in mind that the accent landscape in the UK is extremely diverse and that they might encounter issues with accent familiarity and transcription. This situation could also apply to other countries and therefore a detailed study of the language and accent landscape of the country where the qualitative investigation will take place is recommended.

Conclusion

This paper was an account of my first-time experience as a qualitative researcher in a British context interviewing a sample of White British females. I focused my discussion on issues related to context familiarity, cultural representation and researcher-participant rapport from a cross-cultural perspective. In this paper, I used the term cross-cultural research as a situation where the researcher is conducting research in a cultural context that is different from his own. I felt that by sharing my experience as someone having a cross-cultural identity among a homogenous White British sample population might provide some new insights that could help other novice researchers from Asia envisaging qualitative researcher in the UK or in another country of their own. I have stressed on the need to devote time in familiarising in the participant's environment through engaging in social activities prior to conducting the actual interviews. I have also raised concerns about the use of brand interpersonal relationship metaphors in cross-cultural contexts and also pointed out the difficulties that a non-Native speaker might encounter with different accents from native English speakers. I also shared a few tactics that I personally used to develop a stronger rapport with my respondents, which included the use of an appropriate nickname, the emphasis on my Mauritian cultural background and my willingness to adapt to the respondents' interaction needs.

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