

Cross-Cultural Triangulation Employing an Internet Methodology: Bringing the World into the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Marketing curricula across the nation have embraced the Internet. URLs, classroom on-line bulletin boards, web assignments, and search engines are no longer novelties, but rather classroom mainstays. While the Internet as a marketing educational tool has already been touted and explored in many contexts, utilizing web sites as a means of cross-cultural collaborative research has not yet been integrated within the marketing classroom. This article introduces the idea of using a cross-cultural collaborative Internet methodology in the context of a marketing project. A cross-cultural triangulation method of data collection and analysis is suggested. Triangulation is employed in an effort to maximize cultural differences and potential research applications of the classroom project.

Introduction

An estimated 250.8 million people globally are interconnected via the World Wide Web (Nielsen-NetRatings, 2001). Furthermore, researchers predict that by the year 2003 at least five percent of all global transactions will be completed electronically (Novak, et al. 2000). Mass globalization and technological advances such as the Internet have brought cultures closer together. They have reinforced the need for greater understanding of cross-cultural consumer behavior and a heightened interest in cross-cultural research, particularly within the marketing education arena.

The aim of this paper is to identify the ease with which cross-cultural research can be accomplished with the use of the Internet. In addition, it stresses the importance of introducing global data collection to marketing students. We will first provide an overview of the growth of global marketing, the need to understand global market segments. We will then consider how the Internet may be used as a tool for collecting, analyzing and understanding cross-cultural issues. Finally, we will present an example of a cross-cultural triangulation research study undertaken as a marketing project to help bring the world into the business classroom.

Global Marketing Segmentation

In this technological age it is imperative for marketing students and researchers to gain a better understanding of global marketing. Global marketing offers organizations the ability to transfer products, brands, and ideas across subsidiaries in different countries. Some advances of global marketing include increased cost efficiencies (from reduced

duplication of efforts), fostering greater links between national marketing infrastructures, and ultimately a global marketing infrastructure resulting in better management of product lines and brands. One outcome of the global marketing trend is the emergence of global customers, or global market segments.

Global market segmentation (GMS) is "the process of identifying specific segments across countries with homogeneous attributes that are likely to exhibit similar buying behaviors"(Kumar and Naggpal, 2001). For a GMS strategy to be successful segments should be easily defined and measured, substantial enough to be economically worth while, accessible through the media, easily developed with potential to expand, and be applied to a market that is not competitively mature (Kumar and Naggpal, 2001). Success in targeting these segments is largely dependent upon the quality and timeliness of consumer and market information

The need to understand consumer bases for multiple cultures is reinforced by the fact that in the global marketplace products reach different stages of their life cycle at different times, in different countries. The ability to understand and track how products diffuse through multiple markets and the subsequent effect this is likely to have on marketing strategy is becoming crucial. This need is further fueled by media, such as the Internet, that have the ability to disseminate information across different countries at an unprecedented speed. To succeed, marketers must have the ability to simultaneously monitor, evaluate and disseminate information on multiple markets.

Internet Research

As a medium for data collection the Internet has reinvented cross-cultural research by providing users with up-to-date real time information on the differing views of products and services held by global consumers (Lindsay and McLaren, 2000). The Worldwide Web permits academics and researchers access to a global pool of respondents in a timely and efficient manner. In the beginning, researchers had their doubts about Internet data collection. Some of the concerns addressed involved respondents' motivations and consistency, as well as the validity and reliability of the data (Billings, 2001; Stanton, 1998). While some researchers are still apprehensive about Internet data collection many have embraced the technology. Furthermore, data collected on-line is receiving increasing support and acceptance in the marketing realm. (Billings, 2001).

Internet Experimental Learning

Higher education has recently been employing a shift from an "instruction paradigm" to a "learning paradigm" (Saunders, 1997). Marketing instructors are experiencing a role change; they are becoming less of a lecturer and more of a learning facilitator (Smart, Kelley & Conant 1999). Methods often employed to create this new learning paradigm involve projects that require students to apply theoretical concepts to real life scenarios such as the use of case studies, project work including the creation of marketing plans for companies within the local community and work place experience in the form of internships. The current trend in this arena is towards using technology in the classroom. One study that addressed changes in marketing education found that 14% of comments made by marketer practitioners were related to the ample use of technology in the classroom (Smart, Kelley & Conant 1999).

Natesan and Smith (1998) have proposed numerous uses for the Internet as a marketing educational tool. These include utilizing the Internet for communication, information search and retrieval, analytical and problem solving, electronic mentoring and career networking, and promotion. Absent from this list, however, is the integration of the Internet as a systematic means for experimental data collection in the classroom

Cross-Cultural Internet Methodology

In general, the educational system has already utilized the Internet for collaborative research. Most of this effort, however, has been directed towards elementary and secondary education rather than at the collegiate level. On-line databases, like TELUS Learning Connection (<http://www.2learn.ca>) based in Canada, have been constructed on-line to facilitate collaborative projects (Abas, 2001). TELUS is a database rich with collaborative projects that extend beyond Canada and to other nations. For example, a number of projects conducted on TELUS allow comparisons and contrasts to be made between cultures. While most of the projects posted on the web site are for younger students it illustrates the learning potential and opportunities that the Internet affords educators.

At the collegiate level, collaborative Internet research projects have received relatively little attention in the marketing education literature. Natesan and Smith (1998) discuss cross-cultural marketing exercises in terms of "international netpals" and Internet guests. These exercises are centered on email and class communication boards that seek to educate students on different marketing practices between countries and cultures. Ultimately, these exercises should strengthen student awareness of globalization. As

noted previously, in a global market place cultural research and understanding is mandated.

We propose an electronic methodology that offers a more systematic approach to international marketing research questions and that also has the potential to offer significant value-added as a pedagogical device. With global market segmentation, a need for continuous tracking and reevaluation exists that can best be addressed by the use of on-line technology. Introducing students to these new methodologies will prepare them for the global, technical, and fast paced business world (Kumar, 2001).

The specific methodology that we postulate to be beneficial in collecting, evaluating, and educating marketers, researchers, as well as students is *triangulation*. This technique is defined as "...collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings and using a variety of methods" (Sayre, 2001, p.46). Our specific methodology uses individuals from three classrooms located in different countries to complete web surveys that can either be created by faculty or students. Triangulation offers marketing practitioners an unprecedented opportunity to collaborate and learn from other cultures. The Internet provides an easy and efficient means for data collection that can be analyzed by students and/or teachers from each country.

How does triangulation work in a marketing education context? Web surveys, which are posted on-line through web sites, can be created as a class project. The topic chosen should be pertinent to the class material with the results being discussed in the framework of class concepts. This cross-cultural triangulation should enable classes to pinpoint consumption differences and similarities across the cultures. Marketing applications can then be drawn and adapted for the differing cultures. Our methodology facilitates students' understanding of global market segmentation (GMS) by providing viable data from which to draw real life applications – data they themselves have helped to generate.

Online Triangulation: A Pilot Project

In an effort to determine the effectiveness of the cross-cultural Internet methodology within the classroom, we conducted a classroom experiment among students in Ireland, Australia and the United States. Student participants were drawn from different areas of study: from the United States students' main area of study was human sciences, from Australia participants were predominantly hospitality and management students, and Irish participants were business students. Despite the fact that students were from different areas of commerce, marketing is a component of all their curricula. As such the methodology employed was not only

applicable to multiple disciplines but also permitted greater integration and interaction amongst them.

Participating classes ranged in size from 50 – 140 students. The high enrollment coupled with the level of the class (the majority of students were undergraduate) restricted our ability to fully involve the students in the survey development and analysis. In an ideal situation, should class sizes permit, students would be more actively involved in the design of the study, the development of the measurement instrument and the analysis of findings. For large classes, as in this case, student involvement is restricted to participation in the study and discussion and implications of findings.

To demonstrate the importance and benefits of cross-cultural collaboration the topic chosen for this study was the construct of *authenticity* in Irish pubs/restaurants. This research issue was easily integrated in a lecture on cross-cultural consumption, a subject applicable to consumer affairs, hospitality and business students.

The methodology involved a number of stages. First each participating class contributed ten photographs of Irish pubs taken in their respective country yielding a total of 30 images. Next, a web site was created to display these images and host an online survey. The web site was created using the Net Objects Fusion computer program software that facilitates web site and survey construction. The web site was hosted in the United States and can be viewed at <http://fafnir.berry.edu/AU-CL/irishpub.html>.

The survey raised a number of questions relating to authenticity and its importance as a deciding factor in the decision to frequent a specific establishment. The findings of this research could be used by each class to identify and discuss potential implications for their discipline. Furthermore, introducing students at this stage in their education to the pertinence of identifying market segments, gathering and analyzing information with multiple methodologies in this high tech global environment is most beneficial to them.

To participate in the exercise students from all three countries were required to logon to the website and complete the online questionnaire. Questions posed included: How important is authenticity? How would you describe the atmosphere of an "authentic" Irish pub? How would you describe the interior of an "authentic" Irish pub? How would you know if an "authentic" Irish pub was not authentic? How important is "authenticity" in your decision to patronize an Irish pub? Upon completion of the survey students were asked to complete an image sorting task, whereby they were asked to determine the origin of each of the 30 pictures presented and rate how authentic each image was on a scale from one to seven. Finally, demographic information was

collected. Data were then analyzed independently by authors from each of the three participating countries and findings presented to students for interpretation and discussion.

Discussion

The findings of this exercise can be looked at from two perspectives 1) The actual results of the study and 2) the pedagogical implications that arose from it.

Study Results

The results of this and related studies bearing upon the authenticity of ethnic retail environments have been reported elsewhere and are beyond the scope of this paper (Lego et. al, 2001a, Lego et al, 2001b). Briefly, the results indicated both similarities and differences in consumption practices in each of these countries. Interestingly, Australia and the United States held very uniform perspectives on what constitutes an authentic and non-authentic Irish pub. For example, Irish stereotypes (the color green, leprechauns and shamrocks) were present in the United States and Australian respondents' answers, but never mentioned within the Irish sample. Furthermore, both countries selected the same photographs of pubs that they considered "most" and "least" authentic.

In contrast, Irish students countered many of the beliefs that Australians and Americans held regarding "authentic" Irish pubs. Their aesthetic perspective on an authentic and non-authentic Irish pub significantly differed from respondents in Australia and the United States. In general, subjects in Ireland described authentic Irish pubs in terms of the intangible, whereas students in Australia and the United States defined authentic pubs attributes in the environment.

Pedagogical Results

From an educational or instructional perspective the outcomes were extremely positive. The methodology and findings of the study were used as a platform for discussing cross-cultural issues and challenging students' current paradigms regarding, amongst other things research, cross cultural issues, and disciplinary applications and implications. For example, the American students were surprised with their results and how their mental construction of an "authentic" Irish pub greatly differed from Irish students. This in turn aided in the creation of a more meaningful class discussion by providing added value to the theoretical concepts addressed in class and forcing students to become more analytical and giving greater credence to the content of the lecture. By participating in the exercise students demonstrated a greater sense of "ownership" in the project. Students felt more involved and interested in the subject matter. They also questioned and challenged many issues and concepts that previously they would have ignored or accepted "because it says so in the book." In

essence, the exercise encouraged students to become more analytical and provided them with the hands on opportunity to witness for themselves the application and value of many of the theoretical concepts addressed in class. The project also encouraged greater collaboration among multiple disciplines motivating students to consider the ramifications of the findings on not only their own discipline, but also that of others. The end result of which was a thorough understanding and appreciation for the subject matter and the subsequent impact on many areas of commerce, as well as a greater sense of involvement and personal satisfaction.

Conclusion

Despite the efforts of educators many students often adopt a passive role in the classroom learning process. The result of this passivity may be a student that knows something because he/she has to, not because he/she wants to. Many marketing educators recognize the perils of this approach, and are interested in techniques that ramp up the level of involvement level of their students – hopefully with increased comprehension of class concepts as a by-product.

The use of tools such as case studies and work experience programs assist greatly in improving this situation but still, in some cases, they lack the inspiration for students to fully own and understand material being covered. Whereas we are in no way diminishing the importance of these tools we are merely suggesting that educators add to their tool box of instructional techniques. Cross-cultural Internet projects, such as the one outlined in this paper can equip students with a variety of valuable business and personal skills including, research methodology, web site development and administration, data analysis, international marketing, strategy formulation, decision making, problem solving and project management. The triangulation technique provides a way to increase student involvement while simultaneously increasing exposure to other cultural perspectives. This round-robin online methodology could be adapted to a variety of marketing education contexts. For example, students in each country could collect advertising they deem to be representative of a dominant cultural value or trend in their own culture, and these selections could be compared with those posted by students in other countries. Projects such as this also encourage cross discipline and cross-cultural collaboration and when coupled with existing instructional techniques can provide a more well versed, astute student and a more stimulating learning experience. We strongly encourage our colleagues to consider triangulation and other ways to leverage the potential of an online environment to improve the pedagogical experience for their students.

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