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A Grounded Theory Approach in a Branding Context: Challenges and lessons learnt during the research process.

Anne Rindell, PhD.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss challenges and lessons learnt when conducting a classic grounded theory study in a marketing context. The paper focuses on two specific challenges that were met during a specific research process. The first challenge related to positioning the study, namely, specifying “what the study is a study of”. The second challenge concerned the choice between formal or substantive theory. Both challenges were accentuated as the emerged core category concerned a phenomenon that has caught less attention in marketing, that is, the temporal dimension in corporate images. By the temporal dimension in corporate images we mean that corporate images often have roots in earlier times through consumer memories. In other words, consumers are not tabula rasa, that is, blank sheets of paper on which communication messages can be printed. Rather, consumers have a pre-understanding of the company that works as an interpretation framework for company actions in the present. The lessons learnt from this research process can be summarized as “stay faithful to the data”, “write memos on issues you reflect upon although they might be in another substantial field” as they might become useful later, and, “look into thinking in other disciplines” as disciplines do not develop equally.

Introduction

Classic grounded theory is not a mainstream methodology in marketing, especially not in branding and image research. This is surprising, as the original perspective marketing adopted was that of the consumer, and therefore classic grounded theory studies could provide important new insights into consumers, given that the aim is to develop fresh insights and new theories (Goulding, 1998). As Payne et al. state, although consumer understanding expresses the initial perspective marketing

adopted, the mainstream marketing literature is largely organization-focused in its nature (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). However, especially within marketing communications and branding, leading scholars now urge for genuine consumer understanding in a branding context (Schultz, 2006). This may enhance the interest for classic grounded theory among branding and marketing communication scholars as this area might benefit from the development of explanatory theory. Nevertheless, from my own experience, there are only a few academic articles that have a methodological approach and can provide explicit guidance for novel researchers in using classic grounded theory in a marketing context (see e.g. Goulding, 1998). Practical advice from experienced CGT scholars in marketing can also be hard to find in one's home country. Moreover, differences in methodological approaches concerning GT and especially misconceptions among scholars (Goulding, 1998) made the present research process challenging. However, my supervisor's full support was valuable here.

In sum, this paper examines a research process with a classic grounded theory approach in a branding context. The purpose of this paper is to discuss especially two challenges met and lessons learnt during the research process. The first issue concerns the challenge of positioning the study within an area in marketing and the second challenge concerns the choice between formal or substantive theory. In the paper, some reflections are also made in relation to researcher experiences in doing the research.

The paper is organized as follows: first, a short overview of the conducted study is provided in order to give a context for the discussion. Then, the first challenge, positioning the study within marketing research, will be discussed together with some lessons learnt from the journey. Then, the second challenge, to choose between generating formal or substantive theory, is discussed. Finally, concluding reflections, implications and contributions of the paper are presented.

The Temporal Dimension in Consumers' Corporate Image Constructions

This research process was initiated by an episode in the spring of 2004. It was Saturday and I came out to the parking place outside our house. Our neighbor had just arrived from a

shopping trip and was unpacking his car. My presence obviously got him embarrassed, he took his time when unpacking his car and finally, as I didn't leave, he began to excuse himself for having shopping bags from a shop nearby for home decoration that had opened up some time ago. He explained he got an impulse all of a sudden to look into the shop although he doesn't usually shop there. It had been a real surprise to him to find out that they sold nice, good quality things and that the shop was really fresh and inviting. He hadn't expected that and was still embarrassed and tried to convince me to go to and visit the shop to find out myself and to verify the difference.

I didn't intervene but I was confused. What was he referring to? What was the difference he wanted me to verify? What is he thinking of? I hadn't paid attention to the opening of the warehouse and didn't think "anything" of the company although I knew it and had visited it years ago.

This episode became the inspiration for a series of five (5) studies with 23 informants focusing on understanding "how do consumers construct their corporate images, focusing on the temporal dimension in the image constructions". The whole data set consisted of 12 interviews, 11 written accounts, one group interview with five persons, and seven learning diaries from students. (see (Rindell, 2007)

In the first inductive and exploratory part, six (6) open-ended conversational interviews were conducted with adult male and female informants at differing ages. The informants were asked to freely elaborate on one initial question: "what comes to mind when you hear XX" [the name of a Finnish retailer]. The data were open coded and a temporal dimension emerged, that is, informants referred to past and present times and future expectations with representations of the company.

The temporal dimension emerged as the most salient code throughout the data and was chosen as a core category. For generating a theory on the temporal dimension theoretical sampling was conducted and data was analyzed and constantly compared in accordance with a classic grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978; Goulding, 1998). Therefore, the process of data collection was "controlled" by the emerging theory. The chosen core category was also considered as the most relevant category for prediction and explanation.

Discovering the temporal dimension was not difficult as informants expressed it very clearly, but it was surprising; “why do informants refer to past times, the founder of the company and earlier corporate strategies and own and others’ experiences?” As the study was positioned and thereby also contributed to branding research the time dimension was conceptualized and labelled image heritage. Within this literature, corporate [brand] image stands for the consumer’s view of the company (Stern et al (2001). Image heritage stands for the consumers’ activated memories over time with representations of a company based on which they construct corporate images today. In essence, image heritage stands for those consumer memories that are activated on certain occasions and become the interpretation framework for corporate images in the present.

Based on the emerged view, a theoretical proposition of corporate images was formulated as “consumers’ corporate images are constructed through dynamic relational processes based on a multifaceted network of earlier images from multiple sources over time.” Therefore, corporate image constructions were found to be processes in the consumers’ minds with roots in the past. These past activated memories were not only initiated by the company or by consumers’ own personal experiences; other “sources”, like other people or other happenings in the past, also influenced them.

The study met the current challenges within the branding research of consumer-orientation and added to the understanding about consumers’ corporate image constructions, especially by introducing the temporal dimension into corporate images. Additionally, the study supported process and relationship oriented views on corporate images as it recognizes that corporate images may change, they are multiple and constructed over time.

Next, two specific challenges that were met during the research process will be discussed.

Positioning the Study: “What is the study a study of?”

The dictum not to generate concepts from data with preconceived ideas and thereby to force data in the wrong direction (Glaser, 1978) is essential in classic grounded theory. However, as the theory emerged, difficulties in situating the study within the marketing literature surfaced. In essence, the question concerned the overall phenomenon. What were these

past and present representations of the company that consumers referred to and how do they influence their thinking today?

Within marketing, some scholars do focus on consumer images and perceptions; however, the temporal dimension at the consumer level had not been the focus of research. For example, service marketing has a focus on customer experience. Customer experience can be regarded as the internal and subjective response a customer has to any direct or indirect contact with a company (Meyer & Schwager, 2008). Within relationship management, the guiding principle is on building relationships between buyers and sellers (Hollensen, 2003). This approach in marketing therefore takes account of the temporal dimension in a buyer-seller relationship. Within branding research the relationship approach has been recognized in research focusing on what kind of relationships consumers build with the brand (Fournier, 1998). Within branding research, corporate brand images are a frequently studied phenomenon. However, the majority of studies look at images as attributes and static end-states (Stern, Zinkhan, & Jaju, 2001), not as dynamic consumer constructions over time as the findings of the present study indicate.

Literature reviews were made within the service and relationship management literature, branding, postmodern brand research, and consumer behavior. Additional literature reviews were made within management studies on sense-making and identity. After the understanding emerged that the study was related to memory, psychology, neuroscience and pedagogy literature on memory was also reviewed. For example, Bar and Neta (2008) propose that the human brain should be considered as proactive, continuously producing predictions of the environment based on similarities between novel inputs and closest familiar representations stored in memory. They suggest that mental life and behavior are guided by “scripts” developed from experiences and stored memory. Bar and Neta’s study can be considered to support findings in this study.

The challenge was, however, accentuated as the findings did not support mainstream marketing thinking, which was confusing and challenging. Our department and especially my supervisor supported me as they considered the findings to be based on empirical evidence although no studies were found with similar or related data for support. Researchers at my

department are world renowned for new thinking within service marketing, and thus they were familiar with the confusion and conflicts new thinking may create and encouraged me to continue. Their support was invaluable but it also enhanced the challenge.

As the study progressed I became convinced that participants were engaged in the process of image construction; especially during the interviews this could be observed not only in what informants said but also in how they expressed themselves through body language and mimic. All the multiple images they constructed during the interviews became a body of consumer experiences out of which the images were constructed.

Moreover, according to Alasuutari (1995), qualitative research processes often have deep roots that can extend well into the researcher's past, making it difficult to specify an exact starting point for the research process. Likewise, Glaser (1998) has argued that grounded theory is especially appropriate for lifelong interests. During my study, I discovered that this research had a long history. I had occasionally been puzzled about how people perceive things, for example, students seem to perceive companies so differently, and even apologize for having misunderstood advertisements and company intentions. A question posed by a colleague after a presentation of the results became important: "are you taking about memory?" This question inspired me to undertake a multidisciplinary literature review. Nevertheless, the question of situating the study within marketing was kept open for as long as possible and frequently discussed during the research process.

The lesson learnt was to believe in emergence and to stay faithful to and to believe in the data. The interviews became experiences for the interviewer as well, and many other things beyond spoken words convinced me about the emerging issue. Especially during the exploratory highly inductive phase, it can be hard to foresee what is to be regarded as data. The lesson learnt became therefore the emphasis made in textbooks in relation to taking a broad view on what can be considered as data. However, as expressed by Glaser (1978, 37) "it is never clear cut for what and to where discovery will lead". Thus, personal support from experienced CGT researchers, supervisors and researcher networks especially within one's own discipline could be extremely helpful. Likewise as positioning the study, the

decision of the status of the generated theory may not be easy and evident in the beginning of an inductive study. This will be discussed next.

Formal or Substantive theory

Theory generated using grounded theory is of two types: substantive or formal. *Substantive theory* emerges from research conducted in a substantive area and is relevant to that, while *formal theory* is a theory of a substantive theory's general implications generated through data and literature outside of the substantive area (Glaser,2007).

In a grounded theory approach, a substantive theory aims at explaining 'what is going on' in the data in one substantive area. The present study is a "one substantive area" study as it concerns how consumers and employees perceive a retailer. The emerging theory on the temporal dimension in images is generated based on data from this one area but the findings have general implications within marketing. Therefore, in the research report it was specified that the focus was on *generating a starting point for a formal theory within marketing*, that is, on the temporal dimension in consumers' image construction processes within marketing. The reason for this specification was due to the fact that the body of collected data at the end of the research process was also from substantive areas other than retailing, like B-to-B and international marketing.

This discrepancy is due to how the research process evolved. Based on data analysis in the inductive phase, theoretical sampling focused on the temporal dimension in corporate image construction processes. As good grounded theory should be modifiable (Glaser, 1992, p. 24), additional episodes were analyzed during the research process in other substantive areas so as to gain a deeper understanding of the emerged theory. No memos were added however, to "the official data set" due to inexperience in using CGT. Also, new research projects focusing on the emerged theory were conducted in other business areas but they were reported separately. Additionally, as the generated theory is in its core about understanding the role of consumers' memories in a business context the findings were also compared with knowledge from other fields of science concerning memory. For example, Biggs and Tang (2007) emphasize within pedagogy the role of earlier knowledge and understanding as the

framework upon which new understanding is constructed.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasize that in advancing a substantive theory to a formal one, a comparative analysis of groups from many kinds of substantive areas may be the most powerful method. At the end of the research process, confidence in and conviction about the theory was reached. Therefore the status of the theory was stated as a starting point for a formal theory.

There were two lessons to learn. First, when undertaking one's first grounded theory study it is hard to know in the beginning or even during the research process what becomes important in the end when the puzzle takes shape and one starts to understand the emerging theory more fully. The first lesson learnt was to continuously write memos on every occasion that probably relates to the emerging theory and add that to the data set, instead of following strictly a structured, albeit emerging research plan.

The second lesson learnt was related to writing research reports. As my understanding about the emerging theory developed, based also on the other conducted studies with the same focus, a discrepancy between my understanding about the phenomena and what can be reported based on one single study developed. The lesson learnt was to try to keep focused on reporting and theory development although it is extremely challenging in the beginning when the phenomenon under study has yet to emerge, since such understanding develops slowly.

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to discuss challenges and lessons learnt while conducting a classic grounded theory study in a marketing context. As marketing studies using classic grounded theory with emphasis on methodological issues sparse in academic marketing journals, to learn and to get confidence in the method from other studies becomes a challenge. Therefore, a special issue in an academic marketing journal on CGT research could provide useful guidance for those who are inexperienced with the method. Discussion of discipline specific issues could provide help here as it is sometimes difficult to learn from papers written in other disciplinary contexts when one is unfamiliar with the substantive area. Additionally, articles that make more explicit the research process could be used as the reference point

for proper application of the method and lessen the researcher's work to convince other non-CGT researchers of methodological issues. Finally, classic research reports provide the good overviews of research findings; however, research reports following and opening up the research process may contribute in new additional ways as guidance for others. Therefore, it could also be helpful and interesting to read research reports based on actual experiences of using the method rather than the sanitized accounts presented in the literature.

As a concluding remark, the challenge of situating the conducted CGT study within one's discipline is not an indication of a lack of knowledge about the discipline; rather, it simply indicates that the emerging theory may oppose mainstream thinking quite radically. In the present study conviction in the emerging theory was also gained from other disciplines. As a result, the lessons learnt can be summarized as "stay faithful to the data", and "look into thinking in other disciplines" as disciplines do not develop equally.

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