

Mobile-methods: using an auto-videography to follow the object circulation

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Abstract

Object circulation allows to create value. For this reason, it has been a topic studied in consumer research, especially recently. However, the methods used for these researches are especially human-centered (interviews, diaries), where the object is a part of a narrative without having a specific data collection and analysis focused on it. This paper proposes a new methodological perspective to study object circulation based on the framework of the sociological mobilities turn. Associating auto-videography and itinerant ethnography, focused toward objects, we offer a way to enrich data analysis paying attention to the object movement and its agency. The method presented in this paper is useful to follow the object circulation in different private and fragmented settings where the researcher cannot be present. It offers two key aspects: a) longitudinal comprehension of object circulation and value creation; b) the enaction of the object with its environment to reveal power relations and emerging practices. We explain the limitation of other similar methods to follow object circulation and explain why and how to use this video-graphical method. In our discussion, a specific attention will be on how to collect data and how to analyze data. We will discuss also about the the ethical aspect to use it.

Keywords: mobile methods, object circulation, agency, consumer research, auto-videography

Introduction

Object circulation is a fundamental aspect of consumer research, intimately tied to value creation (Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016). It encompasses not only the movement of objects from one place to another through various modes like selling or sharing but also involves transformation and cultural significance (Lash & Lury, 2006). While traditional ethnographic methods have been instrumental in studying spatial relations, the emergence of the new mobilities paradigm provides a framework to understand the movement of both objects and people (Büscher & Urry, 2009). However, existing methodologies often overlook the agency of objects and focus predominantly on human experiences (Levy & Hollan, 2014). To address this gap, we propose a new perspective on qualitative research methods called "Object-Centered Itinerant Autovideography" (OCIA).

OCIA investigates object circulation in public/private or professional/personal multi-sited/temporal settings. It extends two existing methods: (1) autovideography, which requires participants to produce videos to record their own experiences (Belk & Kozinets, 2005); and (2) itinerant ethnography, a method for tracking movements (Schein, 2002). Because with OCIA, consumers film object itineraries across different places and social spaces, it can be used to follow and analyze the object during consumer mobility in networked, geographically dispersed sociality (Sheller & Urry, 2006) and to identify the object agency that it triggers in power relations. OCIA offers two key aspects: a) longitudinal comprehension of object circulation and value creation; b) the enaction of the object within its environment. First, consumers film situations and passages that mark the physical movement of an object, reveal the longitudinal progression of its circulation and how it creates value in some contexts. This is different from video diaries, which show experiences holistically, often human-centered and requiring long-term participation. Second, because OCIA focuses on the object, it provides insights into the object–human relationship, especially across different places, and can reveal power relations. In other words, objects do not exist in isolation but rather can enact and influence consumers' everyday lives (Fernandez, 2015) by creating, altering, or enhancing the connection between the human and the object. Compared with the method of taking photos, which depict a fixed visual moment in an object's circulation, OCIA can better trace sociomaterial relations as video provides rich, thick data of images, words, gestures, spatial dispositions, and material presences that make it an effective method for tracing social life (Woermann, 2018).

Studying object circulation: challenges

Multi-sited ethnography and videography are two significant methodologies employed to study the circulation of objects and people. Multi-sited ethnography, as defined by Marcus (1995), focuses on tracing cultural meanings, objects, and identities across various time-space contexts. This method involves researchers observing multiple sites

to understand the interconnectedness of localities. For instance, marketing researchers have utilized multi-sited ethnography to examine cultural consumption among ethnic communities and the circulation of objects within collaborative networks like geocaching players (Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016). On the other hand, videography offers a dynamic approach by capturing moving imagery and providing detailed insights into contexts and activities. Videos integrate different communication methods and offer implicit information that might be challenging to articulate explicitly. Researchers increasingly use videography in consumer behavior and organizational studies to enhance field inquiries with dynamic visuals. Autoethnography, another method, allows researchers to delve into personal experiences to gain insights into consumer behavior. It provides opportunities for spontaneous expression in consumer social spaces where access may be limited (Flick, 2018). Autovideography, a variation, involves participants in producing videos, offering subjective perspectives and insights into object relationships.

Traditional methods like multi-sited ethnography and videography have been instrumental in observing objects, but they often prioritize human experiences over the movement of objects (Woodward, 2020). Despite these limitations, focusing on objects and their circulation can be insightful. Studies adopting an object perspective reveal how objects interact with people and their environments throughout the day (Seregina et al., 2013). Understanding mobilities sheds light on the complex social and material realities shaped by the movement of people, objects, information, and ideas (Büscher & Urry, 2009). Videography, though dynamic, struggles to track the full trajectory of objects as they move across diverse spaces. Moreover, gaining access to these spaces can be challenging, necessitating innovative approaches to data collection (Flick, 2018). Additionally, existing methods like autovideography still revolve around human-centric perspectives and may not adequately capture the full spectrum of object movements.

Object-centered itinerant autovideography

OCIA combines elements of itinerant ethnography and autovideography while centering on the movement of objects. Participants actively record videos of an object's itinerary across different social and geographical spaces, providing insights into its circulation and the relationships it engenders (Büscher & Urry, 2009). Unlike traditional ethnography, OCIA does not require continuous engagement, making it more accessible and less demanding for participants (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012). By focusing on object mobility, OCIA offers a nuanced understanding of how objects shape social interactions and power dynamics (Epp & Price, 2010). There are three key aspects of this method. First, the consumer uses a camera to film situations and passages that mark the physical movement of an object. At various times during the video recording, different places (e.g., rooms, means of transport, countries) get linked to each step in the itinerary. This reveals a longitudinal progression of the object's circulation that is not limited to a continuous film over time. Video shots at each step

can last mere moments that reflect passages (e.g., purchase of a product in a store, preparation as a gift at home, transport to another city, use by other people during a celebration). Passages might take place on the same or multiple days, depending on the object's itinerary. This means OCIA supports longitudinal analyses of object circulation, without demanding time extended involvement or the same data intensity normally required for ethnography (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012; Woermann, 2018). In this way, it overcomes the limitations of asking for and relying on participants' continued time and effort, as emerged from some researchers (Furness & Garrud, 2010), typically linked to a video diary method. Second, because OCIA focuses on the movement of the object, it provides insights into the object-human relationship, (Büscher & Urry, 2009) that features power relations (Pridmore & Zwick, 2013). Moreover, OCIA is an inquiry into the movement of a physical object. Studying this movement in all its nuances (blocked movement, potential movement, immobility) provides compelling new modes of knowledge and illuminates important phenomena such as assemblages, place-making, cultural biographies of the object, emplacement, and embodiment (Büscher & Urry, 2009). The objects can be studied also focusing on the relationship between movement and the lack of movement (mobility and immobility) to understand the different or changing meanings (Epp & Price, 2010). Third, through consumer participation in ethnographic research by filming object itineraries across different places and social spaces, OCIA integrates both object and consumer mobility into networked, geographically dispersed sociality (Sheller & Urry, 2006). It thus produces a different perspective than methods that appear preoccupied with demarcating, separating, or fixing. Specifically, OCIA provides visual access to a part of the field that is not easily observable directly, and it offers more dynamic spatial attention than video recordings from fixed settings (Hindmarsh & Llewellyn, 2018). As a method of mobile video ethnography it can be an accurate way for a researcher to experience the "*multitude of mobile, material, embodied practices of making distinctions, relations and places*" (Büscher & Urry, 2009, p. 104).

Collecting data. Before data collection, researchers must establish the context and participant roles, ensuring a naturalistic approach to recording object movements. Participants use smartphones to capture videos of the object's itinerary, which are then transferred to researchers for analysis. Ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent and protecting participants' privacy, are paramount throughout the process (Flick, 2018).

Analyzing data. Data analysis involves examining the visual and audio recordings of the object's circulation, paying close attention to each stage of its journey. Researchers explore how object movements influence practices, relationships, and cultural perceptions (Büscher & Urry, 2009). Visual analysis techniques, grounded in interpretivism, are employed to uncover nuanced insights from the videos (Cova & Elliott, 2008). Triangulation with other methods, such as interviews, enhances the credibility of findings and provides a holistic understanding of object circulation (Denzin, 1989). OCIA offers a novel approach to studying object circulation, enriching qualitative research methodologies with its focus on object mobility and consumer

perspectives. By integrating visual data with traditional ethnographic techniques, OCIA provides a comprehensive understanding of how objects navigate through diverse social and geographical landscapes, shaping human interactions and power dynamics along the way.

Conclusion

Object-centered itinerant autovideography (OCIA) is a method that extends existing visual ethnographic research. It promises various marketing and consumer behavior applications. It can establish a more holistic understanding of object-enabled consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-firm interactions. Furthermore, it fits well with object-centered ontologies, which are the focus of recent consumer research dealing with networks, flows, and mobility (Thompson, 2019). A perspective centered on objects can account for factors other than ego-centeredness or inherent individualism which tend to dominate interpretative consumer research (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011) to understand how objects enact consumer practices (Woodward, 2020) or to trace the lines of stratification by which power relations emerge (Arnould & Thompson, 2015). More generally, to explore multidimensional marketing questions, researchers have called for the development of a wider variety of methods (Davis et al., 2013).

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