

OUR HOME BECOMES FOREIGN: A LOOK AT OUR PLACE IN INTERNATIONAL DESIGN RESEARCH

Jon McNeill, Fiori research and strategy, USA

In the 1970s, anthropologists began to question some rigidly held tenants of the discipline, issues such as the separation of researcher and findings, the positioning of the researcher within cultural power structures, and the subjectivity of social science research. These topics helped elevate cultural anthropology to a fuller understanding of the previously hidden factors at play within ethnography. In the business world, however, “objectivity” is still a golden calf, upon which strategies and products are supported.

Simply put, applied anthropology has largely ignored the post-modernist critiques that modified its parent discipline. This hasn't resulted in devastating breaks because we focus our energies on mostly business-oriented goals, and business goals rarely leave room for hermeneutics and grey areas. While the complete embrace of post-modernism in design research is probably too extreme, an understanding of our influence on the process and a mindfulness of audience interpretation—both tenants of post-modern ethnography—would lead to more complete, and therefore more successful, research.

This dynamic became especially clear when common cultural identity roles were reversed for me, in the Fall of 2004. When assessing one's own culture with a foreign audience in mind, as I did for clients in Korea, Ruth Benedict's contrapuntal methods of analysis become problematic. No longer does the process focus on juxtaposing a foreign culture with one's own. Instead, the result is found through disciplined comparison of the reality of one's native culture with how one's personal experiences have *shaped* that *reality*. The task of looking at my own culture with outsider's eyes, and relating these findings back to these same outsiders, provided me with a fresh understanding of my role as a design researcher, and a vision of the next steps that design research should take.

Buying Into A Mass Premium America

In September of 2004, Fiori got an unusual request for a stateside research and strategy firm, but one that will become more common as interests outside of America realize that they can not only compete in the American marketplace, but can succeed. Our client, the largest corporation in Korea, wanted to break into the burgeoning “mass premium” market in America; a market that, in Korea, they dominated. However, their attempts to sell these same Korean products to Americans had met with little interest. They needed to understand how Americans defined “mass premium,” since it was clearly different than their own concept. We would be working with their American design team, based in San Francisco.

The “masstige” or mass premium market in America continues to make both the luxury and middle-class brands salivate, and everyone thinks that they can stake a claim in this middle ground between “mass” and “class.” The numbers, after all, don't lie. Discretionary income is at an all-time high, due in part to cultural trends such as men and women waiting longer to marry and have children, while their salaries continue to increase. However, while yesterday's high class would turn their noses at shopping at Costco and Sears, this new breed of consumers are “trading up”—saving for the widescreen plasma TV by cutting coupons and buying store-brand cereal.

The terribly difficult thing about the mass premium space, though, is the continual, forceful downward pull from luxury to mass market. As styles, materials, and functionalities filter into the mass premium market from either the professional or fashion worlds, the eventual demand from the masses for a diluted, mass market product erases the “masstige” status of both brand and design—and thus the search for the next signifier of luxury begins anew. Thus, since *Trading Up*¹ was written, many of the brands that the authors highlight have since moved out of the sphere they helped to define. It was our duty to study the infatigable markers of mass premium; those qualities that could stand the test of passing trends and the downward march to mass.

The study, though serving as my case for post-modernist theory within design research, had a duration of only four weeks from recruit to report, involving twenty-four participants in middle-America Chicago and grassroots-savvy Portland, Oregon. But oftentimes in the world of corporate research, short studies have wide-reaching goals. We were to refine a map of the market as it pertained to our client, complete with marking a “sweet spot” for product development. This information would be used to not only inform the San Francisco design team’s future projects, but also how their executives in Korea would evaluate product decisions and successes. All of that, that is, if they agreed with what we found.

What we found framed our marketplaces in sharp contrast—while in Korea, mass premium consumers tend to value flashy, feature-rich merchandise, our study found the American masstige market focusing on refined, fashionable details incorporated into a professional-grade product.

Feature Premium Meets Refined Detail

An anecdote included in Renato Rosaldo’s fantastic repositioning of modern anthropology, *Culture & Truth*, illustrates how the familiar culture of the anthropologist becomes new when he is forced to look at his own people through an outsider’s eyes. Rosaldo had been living amongst the Ilongot tribe, a tribe that still practiced headhunting, when notice came that he had been drafted into the Vietnam War. His “participants” pleaded with him to not participate in what they felt was an immoral act. To this tribe of seasoned headhunters, ordering one’s “brothers” to risk their own lives in war was distasteful. As Rosaldo states, “My own cultural world suddenly appeared grotesque... My loss of innocence enabled me and the Ilongots to face each other on more nearly equal ground, as members of flawed societies.”²

While my relationship with the Korean conglomerate did not deal with headhunting and war, it did involve two separate cultural opinions about which feature sets, pricing, and aesthetics constitute a widening, very lucrative market.

If I had studied this subject in Tokyo, or Seoul, my mind would have been in a different place. Most products in the discussion would have been foreign to me, and I would have been more willing to take the traditional step back as a researcher and look for patterns in how the participants interacted with the items. But in the banality of Chicago, where I am surrounded by my very American-ness, I was forced to look at my own purchasing patterns, and my own mental models.

¹ Michael Silverstein and Neil Fiske, *Trading Up*. New York: Portfolio, 2002.

² Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 62-64.

Too often a product goes from research ideation to production without anyone asking themselves how much their own experiences color the product. Design anthropology clearly differs from straight-laced academia in that a certain weight is put on the researcher's personal aesthetic style. To ask myself how my previous experience influences my results is not an attempt to root out all traces of myself, but rather, to understand them. Consultants are hired in part for who we are as individual creatives, not just because we gather information soullessly. I argue that this self-reflexivity allows design research to better express how each product comes from the participants and from ourselves, the processors. This is not navel-gazing, and it is certainly not elevating the designer above the participants' responses. Instead, a perceptiveness on how personal experiences and aesthetic tastes affect our final recommendations can only help create a product that is more mindful of consumer needs, while also incorporating designer expertise. In the complicated interactions between research, design, and the real world, ignorance is not bliss; it handicaps results.

While a study commissioned by a foreign client put this issue into sharp relief, any study within a familiar setting could benefit from this deliberate introspection. Most often, "the field" for design researchers and applied anthropologists consists of our native culture. In these cases, I speak about my own culture to my clients, who are also immersed in this culture. The threads between my clients' experiences, my participants' experiences, and my own become incredibly intertwined. While this familiarity with the studied culture can help us know when a theory or model "feels right," it invariably leaves room for personal experiences to cloud—or change—the data. Realizing our own place within the discussion can keep us mindful of where the findings end and our own lives begin.

Interpretation

But I argue that self-reflexivity is not enough; we also must anticipate how this information will be received and by whom. Another way to look at what we do is through the eyes of a storyteller. We innately know which parts of the story are vital to the telling, and which pieces can be left out, because most often our audience is comprised of people who have shared many of our own cultural experiences. When we present our stories, we engage in a little planning beforehand: noting personalities, corporate politics, and possible problem areas with the client that may complicate the way we tell the story. We anticipate their response based on previous experience or our personal reactions to the material. But this preparation usually does not enter into the level of overall program strategy. A study involving foreign interests, though, puts the issue of the audience in sharper relief. It takes a certain discipline to relate the details that may seem like common sense to someone immersed in a society—details that would be glossed over in a different situation—and it takes a certain amount of study to know how to communicate the story at all.

To acculturate us to the types of deliverables that had gone over famously in Korea, we were given a few sample reports. They relied heavily on pictures to make up for the definite language barrier, and were basically glossy design boards. While we did want to define "mass premium" by including design boards full of pertinent products, we also needed to mold their previous knowledge about the segment to a fuller, qualitative understanding. Misinterpretation was a looming issue, and we struggled to find some sort of common ground on which to clearly base our recommendations.

Before the study began, our clients showed us a document containing their best guess up to that point in defining the mass premium market, but after our analysis it was clear that it had major inconsistencies. However, we ultimately made the decision to rework their previous stab at the market instead of creating a new one. Even though creating a new map of the space would have been easier for us, and perhaps a better representation of the marketplace, we felt that placing the discussion in a familiar area would erase any doubt as to what we would recommend. It clearly juxtaposed where our research added to their concepts, and where it differed.

We presented the information to the team from San Francisco in such a way that they in turn would be able to relay our recommendations to their sponsors in Korea. After the presentation they would place the models and the design imperatives into their own briefing on the American market, which would then affect their subsequent product offerings.

Moving toward a universal language

After the information delivery, the San Francisco team contacted us to relate to us how well the study had fared overseas. While we did not get to see how their team had shaped our deliverables, the products since released into the American market have incorporated our recommendations with great success. And, if I judge our work the way that all consultants do, they are now returning clients.

My experiences raise the questions of how far we as researchers should really go in understanding our audiences, and how explicit we should be in calling out our own influence in the process. The next step, now that design consulting has been incorporated into the global economy, is to research the audience along with the participants, so that we can be sure to actually communicate with them. And while we cannot panic our clients by revealing the subjectivity of qualitative research, we must be more mindful about how our presence alters the dialogue. Though it is still our task to bring companies and consumers closer to a lucid, one on one interaction, we must admit that our role has never been, nor should be, distanced and objective.