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Conducting field research in subsistence markets, with an application to market orientation in the context of Ethiopian pastoralists

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ABSTRACT

The typical characteristics of subsistence markets challenge not only the generalizability of marketing theories but also the applicability and validity of the field research methods generally practiced by marketing researchers. This article discusses challenges inherent to field research in subsistence markets that may influence bias and equivalence. Moreover, it illustrates these challenges with a study of the market orientation–performance relationship in pastoralist subsistence markets in Ethiopia. Consistent with the market orientation framework, the study's findings suggest that creating value for customers should be a primary concern in subsistence markets, similar to high-income markets. This study provides practical guidance for future studies testing marketing theories in subsistence contexts.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, marketing research has witnessed a growing interest in emerging markets (e.g., Erdem, Swait, & Valenzuela, 2006; Johnson & Tellis, 2008; Kwak, Jaju, & Larsen, 2006; Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002). Researchers have also begun to pay particular attention to subsistence markets within emerging markets: that is, to the four billion people living in subsistence conditions at the base of the income pyramid (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006; Prahalad & Hammond, 2002) who account for more than 40% of the gross national income of emerging markets (Schneider, 2004). In addition to their resource scarcity, consumers and (micro-)entrepreneurs in subsistence markets often lack formal institutional support, such that they have developed their own informal networks (Viswanathan, Rosa, & Ruth, 2010). This institutional distance from high-income markets (e.g., Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2010; Van den Wayenberg & Hens, 2012) challenges the generalizability of marketing theories that have emerged from high-income economies (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006) as well as the validity and usefulness of extant research methods that provide a basis for most theory testing (e.g., Gau, Jae, & Viswanathan, 2012; Viswanathan, Gau, & Chaturvedi, 2008).

A few pioneers have conducted marketing research in subsistence settings (Arnould, 1989; Shultz & Shapiro, 2012; Van Tilburg, 2010), and this research stream has received new impetus from initiatives concerning transformative consumer research (e.g., Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, 2012), international corporate social responsibility research (e.g., Smith, Bhattacharya, Vogel, & Levine, 2010), and consumer literacy investigations (Viswanathan, 2012). Such initiatives have prompted further qualitative research exploring some of the significant contextual differences between high-income and subsistence markets (e.g., Abdelnour & Branzei, 2010; Arnould, 2001; Arnould & Mohr, 2005; Kambewa, Ingenbleek, & Van Tilburg, 2008; Viswanathan, Rosa, et al., 2010). In turn, the collective qualitative insights from these studies have pushed research on subsistence markets to a more mature stage that supports quantitative research approaches, theory testing, and quantified insights into the mechanisms of subsistence markets. However, some authors recommend taking certain measures when conducting market research in subsistence markets (Krämer & Beltz, 2008; Sridharan & Viswanathan, 2008; Viswanathan, Sridharan, & Ritchie, 2008), such as accounting for context-specific measurement issues (e.g., Guesalaga & Marshall, 2008; Toledo-López, Diaz-Picardo, Jiménez-Castañeda, & Sánchez-Medina, 2012) and adapting techniques for experimental studies to the institutional context (Gau et al., 2012; Hounhouigan, Ingenbleek, Van der Lans, Van Trijp, & Linnemann, 2012; Viswanathan, Gau, et al., 2008).

Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) outline the basic scientific processes that are inherent to studying marketing theories in emerging markets: namely, theory development, the acquisition of meaningful data, data analysis, and learning. We focus on expanding knowledge about the data acquisition and analysis steps by noting the challenges that arise from field research in subsistence markets that potentially impact equivalence and bias. Moreover, we provide guidance on how to address these challenges. Through this approach, we aim to extend the methodological marketing literature to subsistence markets (e.g., Churchill,

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Table 1
Institutional influences of subsistence markets on the research process.

Institutional subsystem	Emerging markets (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006)	Subsistence markets	Potential biases	Research considerations
Socioeconomic subsystem				
Diversity	Extreme differences in household size and income, living standards, access to human development resources.	Resource scarcity is relatively common.	Construct	Definitions, components and indicative behaviors of constructs may differ between resource-rich and resource-scarce contexts, as well as between different subsistence contexts.
			Method (sample)	Remote respondents may be overlooked and are more difficult to reach due to weak infrastructure.
			Method (sample)	Resource scarcity may put a stigma on respondents that makes them try to avoid research participation.
			Method (administration)	Compensation of respondents in terms of financial rewards or social capital is often necessary.
Demographics	Young, growing, large pool of undereducated people.	Subsistence populations are the main source of the young, growing, and large pools of under-educated people.	Method (sample)	Observed differences in representative samples may be explained by demographic population differences.
			Method (instrument)	Low education may cause problems with written questionnaires and leads to concrete thinking, pictographic thinking, less developed numerical abilities, potential problems with memory-based questions, and perhaps response styles.
			Method (administration)	Low education may affect the quality of interviewers.
Dynamics	Rapid social, political, and economic change.	Mobility (in particular urbanization).	Method (sample)	The people that migrate during (longitudinal) studies are often not random.
			Method (administration)	Tracing people that are mobile and that may change names is difficult, in particular in longitudinal studies.
			Method (administration)	Interviewing people in different physical environments (noise, temperature) may cause bias.
Regulative subsystem				
Rule of law	Moderate abuse of office for private gain, reliance on legal rights enforceable in courts of law (including investor rights) are lower, and legal outcomes are more unlikely.	Informal rules and laws may contradict and fill the institutional gaps of formal ones.	Method (sample)	Due to limited availability of secondary data, sampling frames are often absent.
Stakeholder influence on corporate governance	Government, civil society, supply chain stakeholders influence high.	NGOs and government extensionsmay remove structural holes.	Method (instrument)	When nonprofit organizations are used to get access to respondents, this may cause socially desirable response patterns.
			Method (sample)	When the social capital balance is negative for the nonprofit organization, (specific groups of) respondents may drop out.
Cultural subsystem				
Hierarchy versus egalitarianism	Hierarchy emphasized.	Being acculturated means coping with uncertainty, hierarchy is relatively high.	Method (administration)	Interviewers and respondents from different social classes or gender may cause response biases. Consent of local leaders for the study may be necessary.
Embeddedness versus autonomy	Embeddedness emphasized	Embeddedness is an acculturated means to cope with resource	Method (sample)	Key respondent or unit of analysis may be difficult to determine.