

Research Feature

Lessons Learned from My Research Journey

by Wei-Na Lee (University of Texas at Austin)

Many years ago, I came to the US as an international student pursuing a graduate degree in mass communication. I landed in Madison, Wisconsin.



Wei-Na Lee

Although I had a general idea of my interest, I did not have a concrete plan of study or what the focus of my study would be. Ivan was my first academic advisor. After hearing me out during our first meeting, Ivan suggested advertising as a “potential” concentration for my graduate degree. My first class during my first semester was *Principles in Advertising* taught by Ivan. The course opened my eyes to the many aspects of advertising. It was new, unfamiliar, somewhat intimidating, and simultaneously exciting. Then and there, I decided to focus on advertising. In a way, you can say that Ivan started me on this journey. Few people in the Academy knew about this story. And this is why receiving the Outstanding Contribution to Advertising Research Award in Ivan’s name means so much to me.

When the Newsletter editor asked me to write a short piece for the Research Feature column, many thoughts came to my mind. In the end, I decided to focus on a few things I have learned from my journey as a long-time researcher. To some of you, they may seem obvious. To others, especially those who are starting out, I hope my thoughts provide some ideas for you to contemplate.

Finding Resonance Makes the Journey Fun

I attended my first AAA conference in 1990. Since then, I have not stopped coming to AAA conferences. The Academy is essentially my academic home. It is where I find resonance for what I do.

Having an academic home where you belong makes the journey meaningful. Having a community where one can find mentors, partners in research, and people who are simply your enthusiastic cheerleaders makes the journey fun. As we all know, research has its ups and downs. Sometimes ideas work and sometimes they don’t. Speaking just for myself, over the years, I have received countless advice, encouragement, and a few knocks on the head from colleagues in the Academy. I appreciate them all. I know I can always count on them to offer their candid assessment and sincere support. This type of camaraderie is typical of the Academy and is what has helped sustain my research over the years. I believe it is important to find our academic resonance because it makes everything we do worthwhile.

More Than Just Publishing

I remember watching an interview of Akio Morita, co-founder of Sony, many years back. He talked about the importance of curiosity. In his business, curiosity means creativity. In our sphere, curiosity leads to discovery. We do research because we have this need to know. This is similar to what Susan Fiske’s (2014) remark that “we do research to scratch a mental itch” (“Scratch an Itch with a Brick: Why We Do Research,” in Harry T. Reis and Charles M. Judd’s *Handbook of Research Methods in Social and Personality Psychology*). At its core, research satisfies our intellectual curiosity. While publishing is a necessary part of knowledge sharing, it is never the end goal of

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Wei-Na Lee Bio:

Professor Wei-Na Lee is F.J. Heyne Centennial Professor in Communication and Professor of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research examines the role of culture in persuasive communication. She has authored well over 100 published works on topics such as acculturation, country-of-origin effects, consumer ethnocentrism, cross-cultural consumer behavior, and multicultural marketing communication. Her work has been supported by more than 20 research grants. She is the 2017 recipient of the AAA’s Ivan L. Preston Outstanding Contribution to Research Award. Professor Lee is a former editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Advertising* and currently serves as a member of its senior advisory board. She is a three-time recipient of the AAA Research Fellowship Award. She was elected Vice President of the Academy in 2010 and chaired its national conference in Minneapolis. She was a visiting professor at DDB Needham, Chicago and at D’Arcy Masius Benton and Bowles in New York City. Between 1998 and 2001, she was Executive Director of the Office of Survey Research at UT-Austin. More recently, in an effort to emphasize the importance of cultural awareness in global communication, she designed and led short-term study abroad courses in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and China.

why we do what we do.

Spend Time on Research Questions

I regularly teach a doctoral seminar on advertising research. A challenging aspect of the course for those junior researchers (i.e., first year doctoral students) is usually about asking the right research questions. Although this is always the first thing we teach in a research class, it is easily forgotten when we get busy. Interestingly, I have discovered that this is sometimes also a challenge for seasoned researchers when I was editing the *Journal of Advertising*.

Asking the right research questions is the most important part of a research study/program. There are questions that we seek to answer in a specific study. There are also overarching research questions that guide our research programs and, oftentimes, careers. Both are important. During early stages of our careers, we probably focus more on research questions for specific studies and think less about the big picture. Overtime though, it is a good idea to periodically survey what we have studied and answered. Also, what we have not been able to answer or answer well. In this way, we find the next steps for our research and stay focused in our pursuit. These days, we often ask job applicants or tenure promotion candidates for their research statements (i.e., explaining their guiding research questions). I think this is a worthwhile exercise to do regardless of whether we are looking for a job or a promotion. By carefully

thinking through how each of our studies moves us closer to answering the overarching research questions, we grow a cohesive research career and a body of knowledge.

Giving Back is Important Too

As we all know, the Academy is where all things advertising are carefully thought about and studied. If you take a look at topics that are covered at annual conferences and articles that appear in Academy's journals, you'd get an idea of the breadth and depth of our interest and knowledge. This makes the Academy an ideal community to advance advertising scholarship. Indeed, in addition to conferences, the Academy has put forth many initiatives/activities to nurture research such as the mentor program, meet-the-editors sessions, pre-conference special topics, research fellowships, and dissertation proposal awards, etc. These are great opportunities for us to interact with other researchers, elevate our work, sharpen our thinking, and learn new ideas. When we take advantage of them, I hope we are thinking about giving back to the community.

Giving back is also an important part of research and can take on many forms. We can make ourselves available to hear research ideas and give suggestions. We can provide constructive and timely comments in a paper review. We can become mentors. Or, we can simply be good role models on how to build a research program.... The list goes on. I believe giving back keeps us fresh and grows the field.

One final remark: To me personally, the most rewarding part of a research journey is working with enthusiastic and fearless students. They make the journey a truly satisfying one. AA
