SPECIAL REPORT

Auto-ethnographic consumer research and creative non-fiction

Exploring connections and contrasts from a literary perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Narrative accounts of subjective consumer experience are, in one form or another, a staple of qualitative market research. They have an obvious connection with the literary form of creative non-fiction (CNF), yet this connection has rarely been explored. Based on the assumption that writing craft is a neglected yet fundamental part of qualitative research practice, this paper seeks to contribute a new, literary-based perspective to the interpretive turn in qualitative market research.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on a range of extant literature to draw out the distinguishing features of CNF, placing these in juxtaposition to biographical and narrative auto-ethnographic consumer research. The overall aim is to begin to detail the particular qualities of writing that might contribute to better qualitative research. To assist in this quest the attempts at scholarly discussion in the paper are interpolated with a series of digressive interludes written in an auto-biographical CNF style. These interludes are intended to exemplify aspects of the interpretive research mentality.

Findings – This is a conceptual paper seeking to draw attention to and develop a relatively neglected research agenda. The concluding reflections suggest some tangible consequences of this research. The paper suggests that a stronger focus on research writing craft through CNF can liberate the imagination of research respondents and enrich the analysis of narrative forms of qualitative data.

Originality/value – This paper addresses the vast area of narrative-based qualitative research from a perspective which will be entirely new to many researchers and practitioners. It suggests tangible benefits that this new perspective could bring to the work of each.

Keywords Creative writing, Ethnography, Consumer research, Qualitative management, Research methods

Paper type Conceptual paper

Reflections of an auto-ethno tyro

The first-person account of subjective experience written in a literary style is a popular genre of non-fiction writing. Work by writers like Knut Hamsun, Laurie Lee, Jack Kerouac and Pete McCarthy[1] has enchanted readers with fast-paced narrative and resonant insights into universal human experience. Labelled broadly as auto-ethnography, this style of writing is increasingly influential in academic social science and humanities research. While there is no governing paradigm for auto-ethnography, typical features of the genre include the explicit and reflexive positioning of the author within the text, the use of biographical material as social research data, and a subjective, first-person tone in writing. These features place
auto-ethnography at an intersection where interpretive social research connects with popular writing genres such as auto-biography and creative non-fiction (CNF).

In spite of many paeans to its powers of illumination and transformation, auto-ethnography, aka subjective personal introspection (SPI) (Holbrook, 1995), arguably remains in the corner of the consumer research classroom, notwithstanding qualified calls for a more telling subjective reflexivity in consumer research (Mick, 2005). Quite apart from the few reckless souls who flag its use as a research method, and in their PhD to boot (Shankar, 2000), expressive writing and the biographically informed perspective are widely considered to be intrinsic ethnographic virtues (Willis, 2000). Auto-ethnography and SPI, though, depart from narrative ethnography (Olsen, 2003) in the way data are conceived. For the narrative ethnographer, the data are out there to be reported on in a subjective light. The subjectivity of the researcher, and its influence on data collection, is acknowledged through reflexive writing. In contrast, in auto-ethnographic research, the introspection itself is the data source. This introspection may well be interpolated with stuff that is out there, such as memories and experiences of events, but the subjectivity of the account is itself expressly situated in the foreground.

This distinction is important, even though it is seldom clear-cut. Writing constructs and constitutes accounts of social reality, it cannot represent them as a picture of that reality (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Brownlie, 2001; Van Mannen, 1995; quoted in Hackley, 2003, p. 100). Bringing subjective experience into data analysis through the device of a reflexive narrative merely acknowledges this view and, arguably, opens up the researcher’s interpretive stance to the reader’s judgement. In auto-ethnographic writing the reflexive narrative is the data source. Moreover, the reflexive account of events, memories, experiences is the primary rhetorical device that is intended to engage the reader.

This “for-its-own-sake” character brings auto-ethnographic consumer research close to literature. Indeed, there is a nascent branch of popular literature that takes precisely this form: creative non fiction (CNF) (on which, more later). In this paper, I want to juxtapose auto-ethno consumer research/writing with CNF in order to try to develop a reflection on the role, virtues and drawbacks of auto-ethnographic consumer research. The connection with commercial or academic qualitative research need not be laboured. Researchers solicit stories from consumers about their consumption experiences. They cast these in terms of various traditions: narrative or discourse analysis, experiential research, biographical research, subjective personal introspection (SPI), ethnographic/auto-ethnographic or phenomenological interviews. All these qualitative methods are connected by their textual form, narrative structure and constructed nature. They are stories, of a kind. I wish to write about the link, no doubt obvious to some but seldom made in academic or practitioner research papers, between these styles of qualitative research and non-fiction literature. Throughout this paper I hope readers will note the many similarities between research practice and CNF writing practice. I do not want to gloss over the critical differences in emphasis between researching and writing subjective stories for entertainment, and doing do for commercial or academic ends. I do want to contribute to the interpretive turn in qualitative consumer research by using CNF to draw attention to the ways in which better writing craft might enhance the insightfulness of qualitative consumer research.
To help with my attempt to illustrate both the practice and the research uses of CNF I will use some auto-ethnographic digressive interludes of my own, following these with a reflexive commentary. We begin in the summer of 2005, in Los Angeles, USA.

Digressive interlude no. 1: LA times
On my first encounter with CNF I did not make any connection between it and auto-ethnographic styles of social research. It was summer 2003 and my scholarly endeavours had raised me up to the City of Angels. To be precise, I was a delegate at an American Advertising Federation Conference in Century City, the business district near to Hollywood, Los Angeles, USA. I felt an outsider. Fellow delegates were either enjoying an expenses-paid junket (shame on them) with their work colleagues or were busily “networking” for mutual advantage. Either way, they were not interested in me, a non-combatant. I did have a small agenda: I was seeking Angelino-based insights for a research project on product placement in Hollywood movies. Well, not quite a project exactly, more of an interest. More generally, my scholarly antennae were fully switched on, twitching and pulsing, finely attuned to the tiniest shifts in the social ether. In short, I was alert to the scholarly inspiration to be gleaned (as street ethnographers know only too well) from simply “hanging out”. I hung, I admit, in some places more readily associated with hedonism than scholarship but it would be a superficial judgement indeed to infer that mere pleasure was my pursuit. This was Scholarly Work. True, to the uninformed layperson, some academic endeavours of creative inquiry might be regarded as irrelevant, whimsical, even (perish the thought) self-indulgent, but interpretive researchers with the intellectual spirit, the linguistic sensitivity, and most importantly of all, the tenure, to lace our work with creative whimsy must strike out boldly where others will not, to investigate with impiety, to inquire with irrelevance, to seek with self-indulgence. So it was in this Socratic spirit of intellectual fervour that I found myself in a modern Babylon, bravely seeking scholarly inspiration, and as I have suggested, this can be found in the oddest of places. Over the years I have found LA nothing if not inspiring.

The occasion of my inspiration at the AAF conference was the delegate goody-bag, a source fully satisfying my “oddness” thesis when it comes to inspiration. As you might expect, American advertising conferences err on the generous side when it comes to freebies. In the exhibitor’s hall you could avail yourself of any number of alcoholic drinks, glossy magazines, DVDs of prototype ads and experimental movies, lavishly illustrated hard backed coffee table books of agency work, CDs of original music by famous artistes dished out by music licensing agencies, expensively produced AAF topic briefs and goodness knows what. The bag itself contained a nice taster selection. One item struck me as curious: a paperback book with the title “Creative Non-Fiction: Diversity Dialogues”. I put this worthy-sounding tome back in the aforementioned bag and hailed a yellow cab to take me to Sunset for a quick beer before heading Downtown.

Reflexive commentary no. 1
Narrative accounts of experience tell us something about the author. This information helps the reader to filter and interpret the account. The passage above is couched in a somewhat facetious tone but contains the basic elements of scene-setting, motive and characterization. The author (aka me) is relating the experience of being an academic...
consumer of a conference. There is an element of defensiveness about the tone, reflecting the professional positioning of the author. Professional credibility is a fragile thing to construct in a field such as academia, or indeed in consumer research. In the above account the author is undermining the conventions of academic identity performance, obviously hoping that by undermining them he might strengthen his case. You may be surprised to learn this does not always work. I have presented earlier iterations of this paper at conferences by simply reading it out, eschewing my usual conference shtick of extemporizing to hurriedly-produced Powerpoint slides. Some people liked that: some did not. Hey. But that is by the by. The point, I think, is that this piece of text reveals quite a lot about the author’s ethnographic mentality. In turn, this might give credence to the observations of detail. The author looks for the odd, the quirky, the curiously interesting. He tries to engage readers through his very personalized observations. He lets his attention meander to the margins, poke around in the periphery, tinker in the trivial. Not so much a “professional stranger” (Agar, 1996) as an academic version of ADHD[2]. No ontological distinction is marked between subjective reflections and the social world external to the observer. It is a phenomenological account mediated by a person. It is a set of ideographic research data, the usefulness of which is delimited by the interpretive uses to which it is put. It is also an attempt to write a piece of CNF.

Creative non-fiction and auto-ethnography
Some months after my scholarly sojourn State-side, I read the *Creative Non-fiction: Diversity Dialogues* book. I was, if not quite gripped, somewhat more than mildly interested. I learned that I had encountered a genre of writing of great popularity, particularly in the USA. The various literary licks were uneven, some were a bit preachy, but most were an enjoyable read because of their candid, conversational yet vividly descriptive style. They were personal histories laced with reflexive attempts to make sense of and to convey something of that experience. The diversity (social, ethnic, intellectual) theme was the moral of each piece. There was engagement about the writing, and passion. From the book and some web researching I found that CNF is also called literary journalism or literary non-fiction. It is a personalised but factually-based style of writing that uses the essay form. The genre has its advocates (Gutkind, 1996a, b) along with its own society, the CNF Foundation (www.creativenonfiction.org). For its critics too much output under the CNF label is neither good writing nor useful social commentary. For enthusiasts it can be transforming for reader and author and contributes to a better understanding of the world and of the person in the world. One web site guide (www.class.uidaho.edu/druker/coursegoals.htm) describes it as a hybrid of literature and non-fiction, characterised by its expositional style, its literary voice, uses of narrative techniques such as scene-setting and its tendency to show rather than tell. In CNF facts or situations are never invented, essays are based on thorough first-person research into real events and the spirit is humanistic (Talese and Lounsberry, 1996, p. 30).

Biographical CNF is written from the author’s experiential perspective. In this sense it is a form of auto-ethnography: it places the voice of the author in the foreground and values the insights to be drawn from subjective introspection (or, more precisely, retrospection). Significantly, part of the “point” of CNF writing is the writing itself, while auto-ethnographic consumer research is generally intended to insightfully
represent consumption practices, rather than being just a good read, but some might argue that literary style cannot so easily be distinguished from interpretive substance (see Brown, 2005, for a powerful exposition of this view). The notion of reflexivity, inimical to some social scientific research-writing traditions but intrinsic to the interpretive approach, would seem to represent the point where style and substance coalesce. Proponents of lyricism, art, literary and other humanistic themes in consumer research (Holbrook, 1990; Sherry and Schouten, 2002; Stern, 1989, 1990; Stern and Schroeder, 1994) and others who draw attention to the representational practices of marketing writing might agree that the writing and the research are mutually constituent.

Auto-ethnography and consumer research

Auto-ethnography, of course, is a regular resort of professional researchers in branding and advertising, if one stretches the scope of auto-ethnography to include self-told consumer narratives, texts of depth interviews and other subjective textual reports. It has a long tradition in academic ethnography, a growing one in history and literary criticism and a short though respectable one in academic marketing and consumer research. The label auto-ethnography does not imply any consistent or agreed set of conventions. For example, some writers distinguish between auto-ethnographic self-observation and biographical auto-ethnography. Reed-Danahay (1997, p. 2) makes such a distinction and suggests that auto-ethnography reflects a postmodernist turn in ethnography in that it is characterised by the collapse of realism and objectivity and the problematisation of the unified, coherent self. Other writers have emphasised the potential of auto-ethnographic story-telling to realise powerful historical critique, given that the subjective viewpoint of the oppressed can be mobilised by the genre, giving a voice to the dispossessed and disenfranchised (Pratt, 1992). Clearly, self-observation and reflexive accounts of experience cannot easily be disentangled, since, like sense and representation, they are mutually dependent.

Examples of auto-ethnographic explorations into consumption practices include Grafton-Small (1993), Belk (1996), Brown (1998) and many papers in Brown and Sherry (2003), Brown and Turley (1997) and Brown and Patterson (2001). In a recent personal effort, (Hackley, 2006a) I draw on my family experiences in a subjective exploration of the way that ethnic labels (specifically, “Celtic-ness”) are consumed as symbolic resources for the construction of social identity. In another, I reflect on the experience of writing critical work in marketing (Hackley, 2006b). I have included reflexive narrative ethnographic digressions in other papers, for example in a reflexive study of an advertising agency (Hackley, 2000). In the latter case I wanted to convey the research as a personal story, positioning my findings as personal/subjective and also theoretically informed.

The personal context is often omitted even from texts of interpretive research, even though such events clearly contour the interpretative process. Mick (2005) has averred that our own reflections on our direct experience of consumption are far more influential and less acknowledged in the field than ought to be the case. He positions auto-ethnography as “self-observation” rather than as biography and personal story-telling. By this I imagine he means that auto-ethnographic research entails positioning oneself outside the text as well as inside it, as I have tried to do in this piece with my reflexive commentaries. On the other hand, readers will place their own
interpretation on introspective material, so the self-observation element might be no
more than a writing convention signalling the author’s positioning as “researcher”. In
other words, the self-observation might be a way of having one’s interpretive cake
and eating it too.

While acknowledging much pioneering auto-ethnographic consumer research
Mick (2005, p. 1) claims that “…as a field we have not made an earnest effort to
discuss, utilize, teach, and maximise, self-observation”. Mick’s term “self-observation”
evokes Holbrook’s (1995) SPI which is described as an “auto-ethnographic participant
observation in one’s own life” (Holbrook, 2002, p. 2). SPI explores the nature of
consumption using perspectives “drawn from one’s own direct experience of the
human condition” (Holbrook, 1996, p. 248, in Brown et al. (Eds)). As an aside, CNF’s
invocation to show rather than tell seems to diverge with the view of those who feel
that auto-ethnography reflects an attempt at distancing oneself from oneself, as it were,
in the interest of research. Biographical auto-ethnography, on the other hand, would
tend to immerse author and reader in the story so that the theme or point emerges from
the reader’s engagement with the experience and writing craft of the author, rather
than through an explicit “findings” or “reflections” section of the text.

Digressive interlude no. 2: Zombies of the night
Back in LA, I had made the mistake many Brits make in assuming that the scale and
place names of LA compare to those at home. Even though I have been there a few
times I still look at the map and think “oh, I could walk from there to there”.
“Downtown” is the size of a small country and a substantial cab ride from Century
City. After a walk of several blocks had taken about two hours I decided to wait for a
bus on Sunset, still dressed in my lounge suit (I think I put on a suit for the conference
presentations to remind myself that I was supposed to be at work.) The bus was not
forthcoming but I was getting some odd looks from the unending flow of passing cars
wondering when was the last time they saw a white, middle-aged man in a suit and
carrying a brief-case taking a public bus in LA. So, rather than take a day-pass to the
underclass I reverted to type and hailed a passing yellow cab. My driver looked at me
in his rear-view mirror and I sensed he felt that I looked like someone he could talk to.
He reminded me of movie actor Gene Hackman as trigger-happy cop Popeye Doyle in
the French Connection. He was wearing a suit and formal shirt, like Doyle looking
incongruous among the high-lifers and low-lifers that wander abroad after sundown on
Sunset. I was to find that he had more in common with Doyle than I imagined.

During a lull in his LA-insider stories I indulged in a little bravado and mentioned in
passing that I had never feared for my personal safety in Los Angeles in spite of my
British habit of walking around a lot. He turned off the meter and took me to a different
world just two blocks behind my posh but soul-less Downtown hotel. It was like a
scene from a doomsday science fiction movie: no functioning streetlights, a cardboard
shanty-town spilling from the sidewalk into the road, and crack-addled figures
wandering crazily around in the darkness, peering crossly into the taxi and shouting
threats as we cruised by. Most of these figures were black people with no other part to
play in the theatre of LA. At daybreak they were shoed away to loaf in the parks, then
as night returned they ebbed back to their nether world, a shabby tide of lost humanity.
Popeye Doyle told me that he had a gun under his seat, presumably to reassure me that
if any of these characters gained access to the car he would start firing into the
darkness using only his rear-view mirror as a sight. He remarked that if my fellow
guests at the hotel knew about this Dante-esque scene just a short walk away they
would check out en masse. His point was that my feeling of safety while walking in LA
was an absurd delusion. Happily, I had never turned down this particular street.

Reflexive commentary no. 2
My ballistically-inclined Hackman look-a-like seemed drawn to the discordant like
myself. He liked to observe his world and share his observations (like so many taxi
drivers), and on his night-shifts in LA he had plenty of material to cast under his
amateur sociologist’s gaze. He had shown me a vivid scene of social exclusion,
desperation and madness that hung beneath the glossy surface of the world’s capital of
consumption. His demeanour was conspiratorial, he wanted to share his insight with
someone he felt would understand that he was making no particular statement, but
merely making conversation, exchanging a confidence with someone who would share
his interest in the spectacle of the world’s ugly underbelly.

Notwithstanding the physical dangers of wandering naively around an urban
jungle like LA I thought this tale a neat metaphor for my preferred style of interpretive
introspection. Through playful curiosity you can sometimes take a different track and
arrive at an unexpected place, a place which is richer and darker than those found on
the well-lit mainstream highways. Interpretive research, I feel, often seeks the different
track and sometimes finds richer insights by so doing. A familiar criticism of
interpretive research is that it focuses on particularities and neglects the general, but
then again, particularities expressed as personal experience unite us as observing
creatures and alert us to the commonalities in our respective particularised worlds.

Consumer research neglects the dark side: my own experience of LA was particularly
one-sided as I fed my curiosity about the world’s citadel of consumption. My nocturnal
guide showed me the counterpoint to the glossy consumerist ideal.

Critical thoughts on auto-ethno
Biographical auto-ethnographic consumer research is subject to a number of criticisms
(see Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, for a general critique of introspective social research
methods). The main stock criticisms concern objectivity (lack of) and verification,
though if one acknowledges that writing constitutes rather than describes reality,
neither objectivity nor verification can be relevant. Interpretive research is subject to
general standards of research and scholarship (Thompson et al., 1989). Its integrity
is for readers to judge. Perhaps, a more telling criticism is that of self-indulgence.
There is the seductive effect of using ones’ own experience as interpretive research
data. It can appear to the author to have social scientific interest, and to readers to be of
merely therapeutic value (see, for example, Brown, 1998, p. 141, on the “revolting
revelations” of tenured professors). What would marketing and consumer research
look like if interpretive studies were not a refreshing counterpoint to the stodgy
scientism of the mainstream but, heaven forbid, the norm? The prospect hardly bears
thinking about.

Another question concerns the kind of outcome expected from consumer research.
In biographical auto-ethnography there is the issue of the constructed character of
memory which may be obscured by skilled narrative styles. In other words, if is all
about the writing, where does this leave the notion of social research? It is an intimately
personal style of research the value of which is limited by the psychological insight, 
self-knowledge, observational skill and literary craft of the author. Does this 
over-privilege the author at the expense of theory and research process? Is the entire 
exercise an affront to the ethos of social science and the earnest endeavour to build a 
body of knowledge about the social world? Or is it all about the gratification of reading 
stimulating, thought-provoking and engaging narratives of consumption?

Pre-conditions of perceptive self-reflection

Another issue for auto-ethnographic research is that its quality and tone is contingent on 
the quality of experience of the writer at that time. Personal insight is itself contingent, 
emerging from particular life conditions and influenced by personal relationships, 
education, state of health and so on. Age and emotional maturity are important aspects 
but there are also other factors. Economic status, for example, can offer one the cultural 
capital that enables reflection, the leisure time, the material resources, and the 
opportunity to make reflections public whether through personal diaries, weblogs, 
books or academic articles. What I am implying here is that auto-ethnographic 
narratives are at once politically egalitarian and elitist. They are egalitarian in the sense 
that they offer creative and personalised accounts of historical events and cultural 
practices. They constitute an elite literary form in the sense that some are more 
compelling than others as drama or as literature. There is good writing and weak 
writing, and auto-ethnography is a form of research in which substance and style are 
bound together in the quality of writing. The judgement of this form of research is not 
entirely a subjective one since there may well be wide agreement on good and poor, 
interesting and uninteresting auto-ethnographic narrative, but the criteria of judgement 
cannot easily be expressed, and this confines auto-ethnographic research to the liberal 
arts-inclined margins of the grander scientific consumer research programme.

Some concluding reflections

So what of my attempt to juxtapose CNF with auto-ethnographic consumer research? 
My view is that they are one and the same, in style and aims. Looking at 
auto-ethnographic consumer research as CNF, though, might stimulate us to think more 
broadly and imaginatively about the empirical scope and stylistic influences we can 
draw upon in qualitative consumer research. For example, in our qualitative studies we 
rely on the perspicacity and expressiveness of a relatively small proportion of our 
research participants to bring out, to crystallize particularly resonant themes. I have 
had many conversations with advertising account planners who refer to the penetrating 
comment or observation of one participant to represent a more broadly articulated 
theme. How might a brief exposition on CNF principles improve the quality of data our 
participants produce? As for data interpretation, qualitative research in general is 
criticised, as we have seen, for its apparent subjectivity. How might knowledge of CNF 
principles enable us to systematize and categorize data in more stable and transparent 
fashion? It might be more exciting in some ways to take a gold-panning approach to 
textual consumer data, sifting for the nugget of insight that powerfully expresses a 
more general truth. It flatters and empowers the researcher charged with the 
interpretation, for one thing. For another, it offers scope for creative interpretations that 
defy procedural niceties, but scene-setting, for example, is one feature of CNF that can 
be highly resonant in research that elicits consumer experiences. Explicitly asking
research participants to elaborate on the scene of a consumer experience, from their subjective viewpoint, might be a fruitful elicitation technique.

For the interpretively inclined, CNF and other forms of auto-ethnographic consumer research may have rich potential to mobilise post-modern, critical and other interpretive themes in the pursuit of theoretically-informed consumer insights. Subjective accounts can empower the powerless, or at least that is why they are used in much politically-acute sociological and historically auto-ethnography. Marketing research in general diverges from other social scientific fields in its relative neglect of the political in its research. CNF offers a route to radically alternative accounts of consumption, or of anti-consumption, addictive consumption, consumption that excludes, consumption that damages and alienates, and so on. More pragmatically, CNF-influenced auto-ethnographic approaches raise difficult epistemological questions for interpretive researchers defending their work. For university academics, these questions probably easier to respond to in many universities after gaining academic tenure than before (Holbrook, 2002), but as Mick (2005) points out, consumer researchers have contributed to this difficulty by not spending enough time and effort debating and delineating the particular forms, qualities and categories of introspective consumer research and writing. We might contribute to this endeavour by drawing more acute parallels between literary forms such as CNF and textually mediated qualitative research.

Notes
2. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

References


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