Rhetorical issues in writing interpretivist consumer research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how consumer researchers working in the interpretivist tradition go about composing well founded theorized storylines, in order to convince audiences of the soundness of the theory-building which emanates from their studies.

Design/methodology/approach – An analytical framework was derived from Golden-Biddle and Locke's study of organizational ethnographers to see how they made their accounts convincing to their audiences. Golden-Biddle and Locke's analysis revealed 3Ds – authenticity, plausibility and criticality (each with a variety of sub-dimensions) – that played key rhetorical roles in convincing readers.

Findings – Using this analytical framework (summarized in three tables), examples from a variety of authors' work in *Journal of Consumer Research* (*JCR*) were drawn upon to illustrate how interpretivist consumer behaviour authors tackled these three key dimensions: authenticity, plausibility and criticality.

Research limitations/implications – Only a limited set of *JCR* studies out of an extensive field of qualitative research in consumer behaviour were analyzed.

Originality/value – Little attention has been paid hitherto to the actual practices of writing qualitative research within the marketing field. The more basic writing techniques involved in qualitative research tend to be regarded as implicit, skills that are acquired by osmosis rather than being formally taught or made explicit. This can make it particularly difficult for less-experienced interpretivist researchers to learn the tools of their qualitative trade, which are often taken for granted by longer standing researchers. The paper seeks to make some of these writing practices more transparent and some of the rhetorical devices more explicit for authors who may wish to improve their own writing styles or strengthen their ability to use rhetoric.

Keywords Consumer research, Creative writing, Market research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Within the context of disciplinary debates in the arts and social sciences, and central to many discussions on qualitative market research, we review and reflect on the strategies and writing practices employed by consumer researchers to convince their audiences of the soundness of their theory-building and knowledge generation from their data sets, i.e. how they go about composing convincing and well founded theorized storylines (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007) from their material. Interpretivist researchers have encountered difficulties in convincing mainstream audiences that their findings are as much a contribution to knowledge as those of their colleagues working within more positivist-oriented disciplines. Qualitative market researchers working in industry have encountered similar barriers to the widespread adoption of qualitative techniques because of resistance in many consumer-facing industry sectors (e.g. retail and services) to the lack of "hard numbers" in qualitative research findings,

when compared with quantitatively-based results. Recently, many interpretivists have come together under the banner of consumer culture theory (CCT) to provide a "viable disciplinary brand" for the interpretivist tradition, and to attempt to overcome the many misconceptions that abound about qualitative research in marketing (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

In an effort to try and play our part in dispelling some of these misconceptions, we revisit the debates surrounding how interpretivist researchers can best convince their audience of the soundness of their insights. Acknowledging the crisis of representation and the role of rhetoric, we explore how such methodological debates have evolved amongst social science researchers and consider how these debates may better inform interpretivist consumer researchers. We agree with Sherry (2000, p. 277) that "inevitably, our claims to knowledge are situated and our texts are stamped with our own individuality, scientist rhetoric notwithstanding". Thus, from these debates we highlight 3Ds, identified by Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007), that are central to arguments about how to convince audiences about the soundness of research based on qualitative data (including positioning arguments around the collection and interpretation of the data and the presentation of the findings): plausibility, authenticity and criticality. In the second part of our paper, we trace examples of how these strategies are implemented in a selection of qualitative studies from the *Journal of Consumer Research* (*JCR*).

Overview of key interpretivist debates

Consumer research is increasingly characterised by a range of debates amongst interpretivist researchers (of whom the CCT'ers – and now the consumer culture analyticals – are some of the most eminent) about the nature of doing research in this field, and subsequently writing up the results from empirical research into "a theorized story line" (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007). Reviewing the changing balance of papers in *Advances in Consumer Research* and in *JCR* shows how approaches which use qualitative data for examining consumer behaviour have become increasingly mainstream. Qualitative approaches within consumer research follow a number of different directions including interpretivism (which is usually seen to encompass symbolic interactionism (Solomon, 1983), hermeneutics (Arnold and Fischer, 1994), and phenomenology (Thompson *et al.*, 1989)); feminism (Bristor and Fischer, 1993); critical inquiry (Murray and Ozanne, 1991); post-structuralism (Holt, 1997); and post-modernism (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). These use a variety of methodological approaches and hold two different epistemological views. Firstly, constructionism, which rejects the view that there is objective truth waiting for us to discover, rather:

> [...] truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world [...] meaning is not discovered but constructed [...] in this view of things, subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-9).

Secondly, subjectivism (relevant to structuralist, post-structuralist and post-modernist forms of thoughts) where:

> [...] meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject. Here, the object as such makes no contribution to the generation of meaning (Crotty, 1998, p. 9).

However, regardless of their ontological underpinnings, all these researchers are usually confronted with datasets from which they need to develop a theorized storyline which convinces readers that it is well grounded in the empirical data.

Earlier methodological debates in consumer behaviour often centred on the notion of "trustworthiness" to convince readers of the soundness of conclusions drawn from research. Positivists traditionally rely on the soundness of their methods, persuading by "de-emphasizing individual judgement and stressing the use of established procedures" (Firestone, 1987, p. 18). Considerable attention to the soundness of the research design is reinforced by tests of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity in order to establish the trustworthiness of data collected via their experimental work and empirical studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed alternative tests for naturalistic (i.e. interpretivist) researchers: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In consumer research, Hirschman (1986) compared these with the criteria of validity, generalization, reliability and verification commonly used by positivists. Wallendorf and Belk have long since disowned their 1989 paper, based on Lincoln and Guba (1985) which essentially transferred positivistic-type tests to the non-positivist arena, and embraced ontological and epistemological assumptions at variance with the assumptions which underpin most interpretivist research in consumer research (Thompson, 1990; Holt, 1991). Indeed, Belk (1991a, b) makes an explicit statement of renunciation in the epilogue of *Highways and Buyways*.

Later methodological debates, usually taking a post-modern perspective, recognised that rhetoric plays an important role in convincing readers. The problematic of representation have been well documented in consumer behaviour research (Stern, 1998, p. 1) and these reflect the general crisis in representation throughout the social sciences (Clifford and Marcus, 1984; Rabinow, 1984; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Clifford, 2002) as well as the debates about the narrative strategies that we use in writing up our research (Sherry, 2000). For example, van Maanen (1998) highlighted various rhetorical styles used by sociologists and anthropologists writing ethnographic research. More recently, Thompson (2002) has called for a critical reflexivity that takes account of the historical, social and institutional factors that impact on different representations of consumers in research.

Despite all these debates, however, and possibly because of them, interpretivist researchers are still left with the question:

> How does one convince readers that the knowledge or a "finding" is worth paying attention to when it is:
>
> (a) developed from a field-dependent situation incorporating a particular social-historical context and the personal realities of the researchers as well as those actors they study (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987);
>
> (b) when it is offered as an interpretation rather than "absolute knowledge" that seeks the accurate and definitive account of a particular system [...]; and
>
> (c) when it provides readers with a reality portrayed through description and conceptually-mediated analysis of social experiences rather than a depiction of reality itself? (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993, p. 598).

We draw on a variety of qualitative-based studies from the *JCR* to show how consumer researchers working in the interpretivisit tradition have addressed the issues identified by Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) in order to convince their audience that their research findings are worth paying attention to.

Analytical framework

As discussed briefly above, our analytical framework comes from Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993) study that examined the writing practices of ethnographers in organisation studies to see how they made their accounts convincing to their audiences. Their analysis of papers in a top organisational studies journal revealed 3Ds (each with a variety of sub-dimensions, see Tables I-IV) – authenticity, plausibility and criticality – that played key rhetorical roles in convincing readers of ethnographic accounts.

We use these same dimensions for our analysis, illustrating them through examples drawn from our own field of interpretivist studies in consumer research. We have chosen to focus on articles from the *JCR* because this journal (like the *Administrative Science Quarterly* used for Golden-Biddle and Locke's analysis) is highly regarded in its field. It should be noted that it is not our intention here to re-analyse the dimensions already provided by Golden-Biddle and Locke or to extend their study in any way. Nor are we suggesting that our selections represent the best writing in the field of consumer research. Rather, we are trying to illustrate how the different dimensions give us insights into successful rhetorical strategies that lie behind interpretivist consumer researchers'

Authenticity	Convincing the readers that The interpretation is drawn from the data The researcher has "been present in the field and grasped how members understood their world"
Plausibility	Accounting for as much of the information as possible, so that there is some degree of well argued "fit" between the information (or data), and the explanation offered to account for the interpretation offered of the data
Criticality	Incorporates reflexivity "carving out room to reflect, provoking the recognition and examination of differences, and enabling readers to imagine new possibilities"

Table I.
Overview of analytic framework

Strategies for authenticity Questions addressed	Method	Technique
Has there been sufficient immersion in the field?	Particularizing everyday life	High faculty with language Intimate familiarity with members' actions Portraying members' perceptions and thoughts
	Delineating the relationship in the field	How close did the author get? Length of time in the field Becoming a member
Has the author been genuine to the field experience?	Depicting the disciplined pursuit and analysis of data	Type of data collected Processes of data collection Systemic movement between collection/analysis
	Qualifying personal biases	Understanding the unfamiliar How did the data inform personal and theoretical perspectives

Source: Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993)

Table II.
Analytical framework: authenticity

Strategies for plausibility Questions addressed	Method	Technique
Does the study make sense to the reader?	Normalizing unorthodox methodologies	Establishing connections to accepted methodological practices (i.e. aligning with "scientific research")
	Drafting the reader	Writing the reader into the text – use of "we"
	Legitimating the atypical	Use of common experiences and broader categories
	Smoothing the contestable by preparing the reader for contestable claims and building the case for a unified theory	Trivializing differences, and minimizing the importance of divisions
		Demonstrating that highly regarded others see commonalities
		Asserting the expert status of the author
Has the study something distinctive to offer?	Differentiating findings – a singular contribution	Singular contribution
		Creating gaps in the literature
		Juxtaposing the old with the new
	Building dramatic anticipation	Portraying the quest
		Use of terms such as "searching" "looked" "seeking" to convey; excavation of the findings

Source: Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993)

Table III.
Analytical framework: plausibility

Strategy for criticality Question addressed	Method	Technique
Is the text able to provoke a re-examination of underlying assumptions?	Carving out room to reflect	Developing places in the text where readers may pause to reflect
	Provoking the recognition and examination of differences	Encouraging the reader to re-examine their views without dismissing those presented
	Imagining new possibilities	Use of subjunctive mode
		Rhetorical practices that encourage the reader to probe

Source: Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993)

Table IV.
Analytical framework: criticality

accounts as these *JCR* writers seek to make their arguments convincing for their different reading audiences (editors; associate editors; reviewers, and journal readers). In particular, we see this illustrative analysis of writing practices in *JCR* as being particularly useful for less-experienced researchers and for researchers interested in the rhetoric of paradigm debates. We therefore draw on a range of interpretivist accounts from *JCR* and our choice of material is based solely on it being a good example of the specific dimension we wish to illustrate from Golden-Biddle and Locke's

original criteria. This is not to say that other good examples cannot be found, or that each dimension is discrete. Indeed, there are often overlaps between dimensions as will become evident in the discussion that follows.

Authenticity
The authenticity of a study is about convincing readers, not only that the interpretation is drawn from the data, but also that the researcher has spent time in the field and has really experienced the "lived worlds" of the informants. Authenticity is conveyed by clearly depicting the processes of data collection and analysis, together with demonstrating the researcher's thoroughness in these processes and qualifying anything that might compromise this, i.e. personal biases. Ensuring that all the interpretive points made are linked back to some piece of evidence in the data also helps convey authenticity.

Strategies of authenticity
Strategies of authenticity address two key questions:

(1) Has the author sufficiently immersed him/herself in the field?

(2) Has the author been genuine to the field experience?

Question 1 authenticity: sufficient immersion in the field?. Two methods are employed to convince readers that the researcher has been in the field, and thus of the authenticity of the study:

(1) by particularising everyday life; and

(2) by delineating the relationship in the field.

Method (a) "Particularising everyday life" involves three techniques: high faculty and familiarity with language; intimate familiarity with members' actions; and the portrayal of members' perceptions and thoughts (Table II):

Technique: high faculty and familiarity with the language. Many fans employ *Roddenberry's utopian articulations* to express their attraction to **Star Trek** consumption, using *energetic and politically charged images that position the text's images against the imperfections of the extant social world*. Elaine [. . .] affirms that **Star Trek** "was a symbol of a world where there is no racism, poverty, deformity, idiotic nationalism, or political injustice. [email interview][. . .] Frequently, **Star Trek's** *social utopianism is metonymically glossed by the IDIC idiom*. The acronym IDIC stands for "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations" a Vulcan religious philosophy that was presented in the original **Star Trek** series. *The egalitarian IDIC philosophy holds that diversity should be embraced, and not simply tolerated*[1] (Kozinets, 2001, p. 71).
    Technique: intimate familiarity with members' actions. One category of meanings is *the gay subculture's status as a safe physical place and social space, bounded by certain agreed-upon urban streets and accepting ways*. Within this area, informants expressed the sentiment that *they felt safe and secure to walk, talk, behave, and consume in as open a way as they wished. Living in this physical space for 18 months, I learned that almost all the necessities of life could be locally obtained*: groceries, furniture, hardware supplies, alcohol and living quarters (Kates, 2002, p. 386).
    Technique: portraying members' perceptions and thoughts. For Andrew "the philosophy of IDIC and the **Star Trek** subculture are conceptually intertwined: [IDIC] contrasts so sharply with much of what we see today –politicians, religions or at least religious people, just small minded individuals in general pouring hate and scorn on, well, whichever scapegoat they

want to pick on this week. The 'I can't do anything but hate you because you vote Labour/you are gay/your skin is a different colour to mine/you don't believe in the same god as me' view that you see all around you. In **Star Trek** fandom, this isn't present" (Kozinets, 2001, p. 71-2).

Method (b) "Delineating the relationship in the field" involves three techniques which address: how close did the author get; length of time in the field; and becoming a member (Table II):

> *Technique: how close did the author get?. For a year and a half I immersed myself full time within the downtown gay ghetto*, at the intersection of Corner and Williams, of a large Canadian city with a thriving gay and lesbian population. The *sustained engagement* ended in December 1994, and *I revisited the city during the following four years during the summer months*, performing informal interviews, conversations, note-taking, observation and visits to informants and entertainment venues (Kates, 2002, p. 385).

> *Technique: length of time in the field. […] this ethnography is the result of 20 months of fieldwork between 1995 and 1997 in three sites* that manifest a range of forms of **Star Trek** fan interaction: from its most macrocultural and anonymous to its most subcultural and intimate (Kozinets, 2001, p. 69).

> *Technique: becoming a member*. This description of the HDSC [Harley-Davidson-oriented subculture of consumption] is based on three years of fieldwork that evolved from site-specific, part-time ethnography into sustained, full-time ethnographic immersion in the HDSC. The evolving nature of our ethnographic involvement allowed us to experience and interact with different elements of the subculture as insiders. In a process of progressive contextualization, *we began as outsiders and gradually became accepted members of various groups within the HDSC* (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 44).

Question 2 authenticity: has the author been genuine to the field experience?. Two common methods are used to convey a sense that the author has been genuine to the field experience. These work to convince the reader of the expertise of the researcher and his/her ability to offer an insightful interpretation of the data:

(1) depicting the disciplined pursuit and analysis of data; and

(2) qualifying personal biases.

Method (a) "Depicting the disciplined pursuit and analysis of data" involves reporting the research design using three techniques about: the type of data collected; the processes of data collection; and the systemic movement between collection and analysis (Table II):

> *Technique: type of data collected*. From May 2002 to March 2003, we (three female professors, two who had personal experience with infertility and one who initially was purposefully naïve about the topic) *conducted one-on-one semi-structured depth interviews with a total of 23 women and three men, ranging in age from 28 to 47, in the United States and Canada*. Although we sought primarily female informants, during the interviews two husbands chose to participate, as did one other man without his wife (Fischer *et al.*, 2007).

> *Technique: processes of data collection. our study had two phases*: (1) a face-to-face component conducted in Fairlawn and surrounding environs, and (2) a phase conducted entirely in environments of computer-mediated communication. The *general strategy was to begin at the most local level*, a neighbourhood, where the odds of seeing brand community would be lowest but the contextualized behavior would be most natural. In this way it was *a conservative sampling approach*. In order to have a reasonable understanding of the brand communities, it is necessary to observe their enactment in everyday life. With this purpose, the research *began with the study of four families from one neighborhood (Fairlawn) in a small*

Midwestern town [. . .] Analysis of the interview, observational and CMC data was an iterative process of transcribing, interpreting, pursuing new questions and paths, collecting additional data, and challenging, rejecting, affirming, and refining emerging themes until the interpretations sufficiently stood the weight of the data. *Field notes were typed as soon as each interview and observation was completed* (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

    Technique: systemic movement between collection/analysis. With the fieldwork completed, the researcher established a requisite distance in order to complete the analysis of the data that had been collected. The *data* [. . .] *were analyzed using a hermeneutic, iterative approach*[. . .] the goal of this analytical stage was to gain an etic perspective through the development of a series of cultural.. or interpretive [. . .] themes [. . .] *As this process of continual review and revision [of the thematic categories in the data] progressed, and as the data collection continued, the categories of interaction became more robust*" (Ritson and Elliott, 1999, p. 264).

Method (b) "Qualifying personal biases" involves applying two techniques to the reporting of the empirical data which allow the authors to demonstrate their understanding of the unfamiliar; and also to show how the data informed personal and theoretical perspectives in establishing authenticity (Table II). This latter is also concerned with researcher reflexivity and how the researcher's presence may have influenced those observed and interviewed. The ideal of reflexivity, according to Ruby (2000, p. 152), is that researchers should:

[. . .] systematically and rigorously reveal their methods and themselves as the instrument of data generation and reflect upon how the medium through which they transmit their work predisposes readers/viewers to construct the meaning of the work in certain ways.

Note that we agree, however, from our own explorations of texts in consumer research, with Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993, p. 605) observation that it is relatively rare to find explicit discussion of such issues around reflexivity and personal biases in the text:

Technique: understanding the unfamiliar. Our research interest in Harley-Davidson owners arose not from any personal desire to ride motorcycles, nor from any real desire to associate with bikers. *Neither of us was a motorcyclist prior to beginning this project, and neither had any knowledge of biker culture beyond what is universally accessible from media representations*. What caught our interest was the possible existence of a distinctive, homogeneous, and enduring sub-culture that defined itself not only by a particular activity or lifestyle, but also by a single brand of product! (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 44).

    Technique: how the data informed personal and theoretical perspectives. Over three years ago, with *the excitement and trepidation of neophytes, we tiptoed into our fieldwork as naïve participant observers*. At the time of this writing, we have spent *the last year deeply immersed in the lifestyle of HDSC, "passing" as bikers* and *making a conscious effort to maintain scholarly distance from the phenomena we are constantly experiencing and observing* (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 44).

    The main safeguards we have employed against overinvolvement [going native] are (1) critical self-examination and (2) continual vigilance for signs that the other researcher is slipping into a particular, narrow point of view (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 46).

Plausibility
Plausibility is about accounting for as much of the information as possible, so that there is some degree of well argued "fit" between the information (or data), and the explanation offered to account for the interpretation offered of the data. Qualitative

researchers cannot necessarily account for every piece of data, but they can endeavour to capture some sense of the issues they have encountered; demonstrating that they searched systematically and conscientiously through their data and did not ignore inconvenient emergent themes or findings.

Strategies of plausibility
Strategies of plausibility address two further questions:

(1) Does the study make sense to the reader?

(2) Has the study something distinctive to offer?

Question 1 plausibility: does the study make sense to the reader?. Four methods are utilized, in various combinations, to convince readers of the sense of what is being written up from the empirical data in terms of both interpretation and theory-building. The four methods comprise:

(1) normalizing unorthodox methodologies;

(2) drafting the reader;

(3) legitimating the atypical; and

(4) smoothing the contestable and asserting the case for building a unified theory.

Method (a) "Normalizing unorthodox methodologies" involves the technique of establishing connections to accepted methodological practices (i.e. aligning with "scientific research") (Table III):

> *Technique: establishing connections to accepted methodological practices (i.e. aligning with "scientific research")* [. . .] the Consumer Behavior Odyssey collected data primarily through naturalistic, qualitative fieldwork *as detailed by* Lincoln and Guba (1985). *Data analysis and interpretation* in corroboration from the religious and social science literatures *were guided by the constant comparative method of* Glaser and Strauss (1967) *and techniques specified by* Miles and Huberman (1984) *and* Becker (1986). We used natural settings, emergent design, multiple sites, *purposive sampling, cross-context testing for transferability, depth and intimacy in interviewing, triangulation of data across researchers and data collection media, and triangulation of interpretation across researchers* (Belk *et al.*, 1989).

It should be noted that this strategy was used very successfully by pioneering interpretivist researchers to gain a foothold in *JCR* which is still today largely dominated by positivistic studies. Now, it is not so necessary to use the same strategy because interpretivist research and its methodological practices are more widely understood and accepted, even by mainstream audiences. We see this in an excerpt from a more recent interpretivist study which does not need to justify itself in the same way as Belk *et al.* (1989) did in their landmark study, but simply links to the "conventions" of interpretivist research:

> *Following interpretivist research conventions*, our sampling plan was purposeful. Our aim was not to attain a statistically representative sample; rather, we sought variance on the extent of their immersion in the natural health microculture (Thompson and Troester, 2002, p. 554).

Method (b) "Drafting the Reader" involves the technique of writing the reader into the text by appealing to their knowledge or the use of "we" (Table III):
> *Technique: writing the reader into the text*. The story *we* tell is emergent. *We* did not find it in the literature, but *we* can document theory and research that support the importance and

plausibility of our account. Before *we* tell *our* story, *we* briefly review some relevant literature... Using the literature, *we* describe characteristics of extraordinary experience (Arnould and Price, 1993, p. 25).

Method (c) "Legitimating the atypical" involves the technique of using common experiences and broader categories (Table III):

Technique: using common experiences and broader categories. The above analysis illustrates how the *projects, concerns and themes* that people use to define themselves can be *played out* in *the cultivation of brand relationships and how those relationships, in turn, can affect the cultivation of one's concept of self* (Fournier, 1998).

Method (d) "Smoothing the contestable by preparing the reader for contestable claims and building the case for asserting a unified theory" involves three techniques: trivializing differences and minimizing the importance of divisions; demonstrating that highly regarded others see commonalities; and asserting the expert status of the author (Table III):

Technique: trivializing differences and minimizing the importance of divisions. While these studies report some divergent results, *from our perspective what is most noteworthy are their similarities* (Askegaard *et al.* [2005] provides a synthesis). *The unit of analysis is usually consumer identity, with particular focus* on the way that identity formation expresses minority and dominant cultures (Üstüner and Holt (2007)).

   Technique: demonstrating that highly regarded others see commonalities. [...] while people tend to agree that households are important, the everydayness of a household is often undervalued by both household members and researchers. *As Netting,* et al. (1984, xxi) *note,* "*Perhaps, it is mundane, repetitive, cross-culturally obvious appearance of households that has led observers to think of them as unproblematic and lacking in interest*". Yet it is this everyday familiarity and taken-for-granted mundaneness of households and household objects that makes them interesting to study in their own right. Much can and should be learned from the routine, practiced, "ambiguated" ways that consumers pattern their lives (*de Certeau, 1984*). *Margaret Visser* (1986, ii) points out the paradox that "the extent to which we take everyday objects for granted is the precise extent to which they govern and inform our lives". Similarly, as found in the current study, even though people think little of many of their brands, the brands are in fact a vital part of the household system (Chang Coupland, 2005, p. 107).

   Technique: asserting the expert status of the author(s). Over a *four-year course* of this project, we *also participated* in several natural health seminars and adult education courses, *engaged in* a number of natural health practices, and *had many informal conversations* with a variety of natural health practitioners. We *extensively read* natural health media (i.e. books, magazines, Web sites, and syndicated radio programs such as **Natural Living with Gary Null**) to *acquire fluency* in the various natural health vernaculars and to *better understand* the dominant microcultural meanings, ideals, and tensions represented in these discourses (Thompson and Troester, 2002, p. 554).

Question 2 plausibility: has the study something distinctive to offer?. Two methods are used to address the question of whether or not the research offers something distinctive:

(1) differentiating the findings as a singular contribution; and

(2) building dramatic anticipation.

Method (a) "Differentiating findings to establish a singular contribution" employs three techniques: identifying the singular contribution; creating gaps in the literature

(a positioning strategy common to both positivist and non-positivist studies); and juxtaposing the old with the new (Table III).

Technique: identifying the singular contribution. Our findings tell of the experience of multiday commercial river rafting. *Our research is unique in (1)* focusing on key elements in delivering temporally extended, extraordinary experiences, *(2)* representing different participant perspectives in the service encounter, *(3)* detailing the emergent interplay of consumer and service provider behaviours in the delivery of service outcomes, and *(4)* integrating and cross-validating data collected by multiple methods (Arnould and Price, 1993, p. 24).

Technique: creating gaps in the literature. Consumer research has generally failed to address the socio-cultural settings (Costa, 1995) *that contextualize all consumption activity. In the specific case of advertising theory, researchers have failed to explore the phenomena associated with advertising reception in "ecologically valid contexts"* (Stewart 1992, p. 15) *and* have thus tended to *ignore the social dimensions of advertising in favour of an emphasis on the solitary subject* (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Ritson and Elliott, 1999, p. 260).

Technique: juxtaposing the old with the new. The acculturation of migrants *has long been a concern of the social sciences* and has become a topic of increasing importance in consumer research[...] *In a world where consumption is such a dominant domain* of culture, we need to ask how acculturation works in terms of consumer identity formation (Üstüner and Holt, 2007).

Method (b) "Building dramatic anticipation" involves portraying the quest, particularly using terms such as "searching," "looked," "seeking" in order to convey the excavation of the findings (Table III):

Techniques: portraying the quest. Consumer researchers (Peñaloza, 1994) *have long noted differences between the consumption patterns of Mexican Americans and Anglos in the United States* [...] *researchers turned to the literature on assimilation to explain these differences*. The assimilation framework, which examines the degree to which a subcultural group becomes similar to the dominant culture in a nation over time (Gordon, 1964), has become the dominant conceptual scheme guiding studies of consumer subcultures. *While these studies have documented gradations in differences between consumption behaviors of Anglos and Latinos, there are some noteworthy limitations... In conceptualizing consumer acculturation processes, I turned to the literature on consumer socialization* because it explicitly focuses on processes of consumer learning (Moschis, 1987). Modeling, reinforcement, and social interaction were identified as the central behavioral processes through which consumer skills, knowledge, and behaviors were transferred by acculturation agents, which include family, friends, and institutions such as schools and churches (Peñaloza, 1994).

Technique: using terms to portray the excavation of the findings. After reading, *reflecting* on, and *rereading* over 450 single-spaced pages of text, we discussed the emergent themes salient to gaining a hermeneutical perspective on consumer persistence in this context. We *initially sought* patterns in this material *while consulting the literature* on trying, goal setting, cultural discourses, and other relevant topics. *Eventually* we focused on the ways in which life-project framing discourses and pervasive cultural discourses inform the cognitive aspects of consumer persistence (Fischer *et al.*, 2007).

Criticality

Criticality (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993, p. 595) incorporates reader reflexivity, searching for "carving out room to reflect, provoking the recognition and examination of differences, and enabling readers to imagine new possibilities". Consumer behaviour researchers seek to achieve criticality by examining the underlying assumptions that

influence their readers' interpretations of their work, notably by encouraging "scepticism
towards rhetoric, tradition, authority and objectivity" (Mingers, 2000, p. 219).

Rhetorical issues

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Strategies for criticality
Strategies for criticality address the question, is the text able to provoke a
re-examination of underlying assumptions? Authors use three methods to achieve
criticality in the text:

(1) carving out room to reflect;

(2) provoking the recognition and examination of differences; and

(3) imagining new possibilities.

Method (a) "Carving out room to reflect" involves the technique of developing places in
the text where readers may pause to reflect, by, for example, appealing to their
everyday knowledge or something in their lives to which they can relate in a less
abstract way (Table IV):

> *Technique: developing places in the text for the reader to reflect. Consider* as well the
> role of political ideology in *typical* decisions any consumer might make *to buy an "American"
> car* or to disavow the purchase of *toy guns for children* or to place *retirement savings* in
> "socially conscious" investment accounts that avoid stocks in tobacco firms or to buy
> *household repair materials* at a *locally owned* hardware store rather than at Wal-Mart
> (Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004, p. 511).

Method (b) "Provoking the recognition and examination of differences" involves the
technique of encouraging the reader to re-examine their views without dismissing
those presented (Table IV):

> *Technique: encouraging reader to re-examine their views.* However, political ideology also
> plays a role in structuring consumer choice in ways that may be less consciously available to
> consumers and less deterministic in their impact. Consider, for instance, how political
> ideology might undergird the consumption dilemmas that face a middle-class black family
> living in or near "ghetto" neighbourhoods, that is, predominantly black neighbourhoods with
> high rates of poverty... The family may wish to express its ideological commitment to
> strengthening black community institutions... Yet, when confronted with the clearly inferior
> product choices typical of ghetto neighbourhood stores, this family may opt to shop on (if not
> migrate to) predominantly white suburbs. *Are we to interpret this family's surburban
> outshopping or outmigration as waning ideological commitment to black community
> institutions? Perhaps, but political ideology is likely to function in a complex, multilayered, and
> decidedly nondeterministic manner.* (Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004, p. 511).

Method (c) "Imagining new possibilities" involves two techniques: use of the
subjunctive mode; and the use of rhetorical practices that encourage the reader to probe
(Table IV):

> *Techniques: use of the subjunctive mode.* It *may be* consciously available to consumers, or it
> *may be* part of an unarticulated structure that nonetheless produces regularities in their
> preferences. (Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004, p. 511).
>   *Technique: rhetorical practices to encourage the reader to probe.* The world of
> advertisements is peopled by fantastic images... in rich colors and textures, *a panoply of
> visual messages entice, exhort and explain. The literature on advertising images fails to
> encompass the rhetorical richness so characteristic of this form.* Whether drawing from

scientific or interpretive paradigms, *scholarship has tended to treat advertising visuals in a manner inconsistent with their observable traits or their historical tradition* ....The objective of this article is *to reorient* the study of advertising images *by advocating the development of a theory of visual rhetoric*... the proposed framework is more consistent with the processes *underlying* pictorial perception, more closely parallels what real ads are really like, and, thus, *promises* more *explanatory power* for the study of consumer response (Scott, 1994, p. 252).

Conclusion

It has long been acknowledged that style is important in writing qualitative research. In *Tales of the Field*, van Maanen (1988) explored the narrative conventions associated with ethnographic writing and analysed the strengths and weaknesses of various styles: impressionistic, realist, confessional, literary, formal, critical and jointly told. Yet, within marketing research, there has been little attention paid to the actual practices of writing qualitative research, although representation and how we might best communicate our research findings to our audiences have been highlighted as key issues (Stern, 1998; Maclaran *et al.*, 2003). Whenever attention has been paid to writing practices, it has focused on the rhetorical style of a particular thought leader, i.e. as in Brown's (1999, 2005) analyses of the styles of Ted Levitt, Morris Holbrook and other eminent marketing scholars; and Stern's (1990) literary analysis of Ernest Dichter's motivation research to illustrate how textual clues can give insights into the rise and fall of marketing phenomena over time.

However, such studies have not considered the commonalities amongst authorial styles or tried to establish guidelines for others in the field who may wish to improve their own writing styles or strengthen their ability to use rhetoric. The more basic writing techniques involved in qualitative research tend to be regarded as implicit, skills that are acquired by osmosis (Brown, 1999, 2005, 2008), rather than being formally taught or made explicit. Indeed, they often remain shrouded in mystery in a very similar way to the art of data interpretation, which, as Wolcott (1994, p. 36) highlights:

> [...] one may see others doing it without being able to ascertain exactly how to go about it, whilst those able to perform it with aplomb seem unable to provide helpful guidelines.

This can make it particularly difficult for less experienced interpretive researchers to learn the tools of their qualitative trade as these are often taken for granted by longer standing researchers.

We must also emphasise that it is not our intention to be formulaic or prescriptive with regard to writing style and there must always be room for interpretivist researchers to develop their own creative approaches to writing. What we have tried to do in this paper, however, is to make some of these writing practices more transparent and some of the rhetorical devices more explicit. In exploring Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993) dimensions for convincing interpretive audiences, we have shown how rhetoric can play a major role in lending authenticity, plausibility and criticality to a study. There is much fruitful work in this area still to be done. We hope that our current study will provide a foundation on which other interpretivists can build to more fully explore and make explicit the writing practices in our field; and to then go on to tell more convincing theorised stories from their datasets. We also hope that our current study will help qualitative market researchers to counter some of the resistance

that they meet when presenting findings and interpretations based on qualitative data to industrialists working in consumer markets.

Note

1. Emphases added, please note that throughout our illustrative quotes we have highlighted in italic where the particular technique is used.

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