The Ethnographic Comic: A Creative Structure for Analysis, Inference, and Reporting

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Abstract

Different people learn differently. We process and analyse information in a variety of ways: some are more visually orientated learners. The primary focus of this paper is to introduce the concept of the ethnographic comic and to convey its assistance to the processes of analysis, inference, and representation. We discuss in detail how to create an ‘ethnographic comic’, with an emphasis on data collection methods, constructing the comic via the triangulation of visual and textual data, the visual development of a theme/construct, and the final representation of a theme/construct. This is followed by a discussion of the advantages of developing an ethnographic comic. Finally, we discuss areas for the potential development of the concept.

Key Words: Ethnography, comic book, analysis, inference, representation.
Although consumer researchers ostensibly work in the field of science, and therefore are required to produce scientific representations such as journal articles, academic book chapters, and books as the output of their scientific labour, we rarely, if ever consider the format of these representations. What is an acceptably scientific form of representation? Clearly, particularly, precisely—and perhaps peculiarly—worded texts play an important role in the erudite representation of scholarly knowledge, and have done so for centuries. But so too have visual representations such as diagrams and figures. Indeed, some of the most memorable scientific representations, whether they be impressive mathematical formulas or elegant figures, have been visual (for an early consumer research example, see Levy’s [1981] representations of food, class, and culture).

The presence of the visual in our research is perhaps unsurprising, since visual contexts are essential to understanding, learning, and development (Fleming 2001). Within the field of interpretive consumer research there is increasing attention been given to visual modes of academic representation (Penaloza and Cayla 2006), the bulk of this attention has been dedicated to visual research methods (e.g., Schroeder 2005) such as videography (e.g., Belk and Kozinets 2005). However, such an evolution, from traditional representation to an intense and highly skilled means of representation (i.e. moving from Word/PowerPoint to FinalCut), requires new skill sets for established and novice interpretive consumer researchers, and thus may be met with some resistance. To present research findings in video format, firstly the researcher has to invest many hours advancing his/her skills in new equipment and software use, such as FinalCut or even iMovie, as well as conducting their usual extensive analysis of data collected (Spiggle 1994). In addition, and perhaps more importantly, researchers might wonder whether becoming increasingly visual, and audiovisual appropriately serves the scientific and theory-bound objectives of consumer research.

We position an increasing interest in alternative visual methods, such as videography, at this important intersection of art and science called experimental ethnography. Experimental ethnographies are investigations of culture which present their knowledge and represent cultures and meanings in an "experimental," open-ended and contestable manner so as to demonstrate the tentative and ambiguous nature of social meanings (Marcus 1994), thus avoiding the totalizing, exotizing tendencies of prior cultural considerations. It is to this new and important field that we wish to contribute an additional research tool: the scientific comic book. We now discuss briefly the history of the comic book, from its original satirical roots to its value as a teaching aid.

**History of the Comic Book**

Although the comic book’s popularity and cultural accessibility is associated with the nineteenth century, its antecedents date back to the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages many illustrations, paintings, and other art works were designed for public consumption. Although directed at the masses, people had to travel to view them, however, following the advent of the printing press, images could now travel to the people (Sabin 2001). In the early nineteenth century comic strips were introduced into British broadsheet newspapers as a humorous supplement, which involved caricatures
with political topics, targeted at the middle-class, and later evolved to also incorporate ‘funny’ pictures with slapstick themes, targeted at the working class. Due to the subversive power of the pictorial narrative, these ‘strips’ eventually became standalone commonplace literature as comic books. Unlike comic strips, which consist of a few panels in a newspaper, comic books have multiple pages and panels, and tell a story (Hall and Lucal 1999). Within the confines of the comic book, writers could critique royalty and politicians in a manner that they could not in traditional text, thus offering its readers novel entertainment boundaries. Popularity rose rapidly and the ‘comic book’ became known as ‘the biggest selling penny paper in the world’, such its broad readership (Sabin 2001). However, the cultural value of the comic book, a mature medium of story telling, goes beyond solely entertainment purposes.

**Comic Books in Teaching and Learning**

The comic book has become an acceptable teaching aid, primarily used to guide learning for children, young adults, and even college students (Snyder 1997, Hall and Lucal 1999, Bitz 2004, Gerde and Foster 2008). The value lies in the fact that “comics require that the viewer read pictures, not look at them” (Corliss 2005, p.102). Hall and Lucal (1999) argue that like fiction, film, and music, comic books too are a popular media that could be used as a means to establish links between the classroom and a ‘real world’ context. Gerde and Foster (2008) argue that comic books are a modern form of narrative that can be an effective means to teach the complexities of the social world. A comic book not only provides relevant dialogue, but also the drawings serve as graphic illustrations of the setting, the spacing of the actors, their dress, gestures, and expressed emotions (Snyder 1997). Yang (2003, in Gerde and Foster 2008) identifies five attributes of comic books that add to the learning experience: motivating, visual, permanent, intermediary, and popular. Comic books not only attract and keep the student’s attention, but also bridges socio-economic, generational and cultural gaps (Snyder 1997, Hall and Lucal 1999, Gerde and Foster 2008).

It is thus no surprise that comic books are being used in classrooms from elementary school to Yale University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Gerde and Foster 2008). Gerde and Foster (2008) discuss how the X-Men comic books supplemented their classroom teaching of business ethics and business-and-society topics. However, the comic book’s value for use in academia has not been fully reached. Morrison, Bryan and Chilcoat (2002) highlight that a more thorough connection between context and learning is established when students create their own comic books. Creating a comic book based a particular topic/phenomenon is more valuable to learning than solely reading a comic book of same topic/phenomenon, as attempting to construct a comic book’s ‘story’ requires a deeper contextual understanding of the topic/phenomenon, and thus fosters learning. Transferring this claim to realm of interpretive consumer research we ask: what value is created, for the interpretive consumer researcher, when comic books are ‘drawn’ using data sources? And more practically, how can interpretive consumer researchers create comic books using data sources?
We will now begin to introduce the ‘ethnographic comic’, which we believe to be a scientific and stimulating approach to analysis, inference, and representation. The ethnographic comic begins in the field: employing a number of data collection methods is most appropriate, and visual ethnography essential. We will now discuss a variety of data collection methods that the researcher may draw upon when creating an ethnographic comic.

The Ethnographic Comic Book

Beginning in the Field

A pertinent question for ethnographers is: have we really observed what our descriptions claim (Lofland and Lofland 1995)? It is Stewart’s (1998, p.15) term veracity that best encapsulates this concern. Veracity refers to a “devotion to the truth... the power of conveying or perceiving the truth... conformity with the truth or fact”. Veracity is limited without a variety of sources of data (Stewart 1998). Thus, ethnographic inquiry requires multiple modes of data collection (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). While participant observation comprises the core of ethnographic inquiry (Emerson et al. 2001), ‘good’ ethnography should allow for the triangulation of data collection methods.

Typically, participant observation is supplemented with data collection methods such as non-participant observation (Cova and White 2010), ‘netnography’ (Kozinets 2002, 2006), long interviews (McCracken 1988), informal interviews (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and the study of cultural artefacts (Leigh et al. 2006). However, as the ethnographic comic incorporates both textual and visual data, we extol the use of visual ethnography in the field – more specifically, photography (Pink 2001, 2006). While we will not discuss the nature of textual data collection methods (see Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Stewart 1998, Lofland and Lofland 1995, Belk 2006), we will discuss briefly the dynamics of photography as a data source.

Photographs as Data

Visual ethnographic methods attempt to capture a ‘visual record of the culture’ (Schwartz 1989). Visual methods offer a reality as loyal as possible to the context under investigation (Pink 2001). Two activities of photographic ethnography could be employed to aid the ‘drawing’ of ethnographic comics: making visual representations (studying culture by producing photographs) and examining existing visual representations (studying photographs for information about the culture) (Pink 2001). However, it must be noted that is not the visual content, which inform, but rather the researcher’s analysis of them (Belk and Kozinets 2005). Visual records show concrete details of cultural practices and the context in which they occur, the analysis of which can supplement insights garnished through participant observation and visa versa (Schwartz 1989). The analysis of photographs should pay attention to the four key areas, as suggested by Pink (2006):

- The context in which the image was produced
- The content of the image
- The contexts in and subjectivities through which images are viewed; and
The materiality and agency of images

Analysis should not only focus on the content and meanings of the images but how the images relate to meanings and interpretations generated from the other, textual research methods employed. Employing both visual and numerous methods of textual data collection results in a comprehensive data set, which can be difficult for researchers to manage. Researchers often experience difficulties abstracting and inferring from such a comprehensive data set (Spiggle 1994).

Conducting an ethnographic study can be chaotic (Lofland and Lofland 1995), such its iterative nature, thus any structures that could guide a researcher during the iterative process should be employed. The creation of an ethnographic comic positions a structure for data, yet in a highly creativity and bespoke manner. ‘Drawing’ an ethnographic comic provides a visual structure, which aids analysis, inference and reporting, thus by creating an ethnographic comic book, the researcher’s understanding of the context under investigation is enhanced (Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat 2002). We now outline the steps to be taken when attempting to ‘draw’ an ethnographic comic using data sources.

‘Drawing’ an Ethnographic Comic
A comic can be created using any comic drawing desktop software, or manually, if one possesses such talent (and/or time), however the software we have used to aid creating ethnographic comics has been ‘Comic Life’, a user-friendly application inclusive on some Apple Mac Book products ($29.99 to purchase otherwise at http://www.comiclife.com).

*Step one:* Upon opening the application the researcher chooses a comic style (i.e. the shape and number of panes for each individual page), after doing so, the researcher ‘drags and drops’ previously categorized photographs (see Spiggle 1994) from the data set into the provided panes on each individual page. Thus developing the theme’s ‘story’ visually. Photographs can be ‘cartoonized’ for genuine effect, we suggest this, as it (somewhat) conceals the identity of participants.

*Step two:* Once the researcher is satisfied with the number of panes and pages, and the photographs chosen, which occupy them, the next step is to triangulate photographs with categorized textual data. Interview or observational quotes that confirm/build the theme can be placed onto photographs, which now serve as the comic book’s illustrations. Textual data can be incorporated via the speech bubble or text box functions. One simply ‘drags and drops’ either a speech bubble or text box onto the chosen panel of the comic book, and then inserts the textual data. For example, an interview quote may be place into a speech bubble that has been placed onto a participant in a photograph, and a field note maybe be inserted into a text box and pace at the bottom of a photograph to enhance the contextual representation of the photograph. Thus, the textual and photographic data are working in tandem to communicate the context. By using the comic book functions and combining numerous textual and visual data sources the research has begun triangulating the data, and a visually layered understanding of the theme is being constructed.
**Step three:** However, moving towards an etic level of understanding, inference requires the to-ing and fro-ing between data and theory (Spiggle 1994). Theory also can be incorporated using the text box function. The inclusion of theory boxes ensures that the data is not being communicated and reported chronologically but that the comic book is constructed based on the relationship between theory and the data sources (textual and visual).

**Step four:** The final product is a comic portraying the strength of an emergent theme/construct and a highly accessible ‘lived’ representation of the culture (or aspect of that culture). We advise that the first page of ethnographic comic should display a title much like an academic journal paper, e.g. “Beer Pong: The Emergence of Abnormal Sport”, along with a brief detail on research site e.g. “An ethnographic comic based on the professional beer pong subculture”. The final page should be more textually orientated as means to etically relate the ethnographic comic (data) to the title page and the theory incorporated, thus ensuring scientific flow throughout the comic book.

**Step Five:** We have presented the processes necessary to create an ethnographic comic in four relatively straightforward steps, once these steps have been completed, we advice researchers to consider the aesthetical impact of the ethnographic comic. This is where the ethnographic comic becomes an art form (of sorts). Creators should ask is there an aesthetical flow? Would this be attractive to academic peers and/or to the culture under investigation? Two of lead author’s completed ethnographic comics have been compiled into poster format and each presented at internationally renowned conferences. Please see appendix A for a completed ethnographic comic presented in poster format.

**Value of the Ethnographic Comic Approach**

Here we primarily draw attention to the value for the researcher in ‘drawing’ an ethnographic comic. Drawing comic books is associated with frivolity and joviality, thus we ask, what is the value of such a practice to the ‘serious’ consumer researcher? There are five distinct advantages of supplementing the research process with an ethnographic comic approach.

- Firstly, the ethnographic comic provides a structure for triangulating the data set. If a researcher follows the steps outlined previously when ‘drawing’ the comic, he/she will have a natural sequence of triangulation to follow. In essence, rather than in an ad hoc fashion, the comic will provide a visual template for triangulation. Using photographic data as the foundation and triangulating with the range of textual data (netnography, observational, interview, informal conversation) will ensure that the researcher’s attempts at theme/construct development will consider each form of data within the comprehensive set.

- Secondly, the process of drawing an ethnographic comic visually layers the sophistication of emergent themes/constructs, thus assessing strength as the
comic is being constructed – it provides instant and visually measurable feedback to the researcher (research team). Thus, providing an opportunity to critiques one’s own work visually.

• Thirdly, following the comic drawing steps as outlined above encourages (requires) the researcher to practice inference. The process of incorporating theory boxes into the comic at particular junctures encourages the researcher to move back and forth between data and theory sources. Thus, the researcher’s understanding of the relationship between the theory texts and the data is enhanced. Thus, learning can be incorporated into future development of the theme/construct. The inclusion of theory boxes ensures a balance between the emic and etic representation of the culture (phenomenon) is attained.

• Fourthly, the final comic (which can be compiled into poster form for international conferences) communicates a relatively ‘live’ representation of the culture in a widely accessible manner. When engaging in presentations, the more intense and context specific the detail the greater the clarity and opportunities for learning (Tufte 2003). While the ethnographic comic is positioned between textual presentation and video presentation, with regards to visual intensity, its combination of both visual and textual intensity ensures greater speed of access and more directed feedback from peers, and community members in the form of ‘member cheeks’. Both these avenues of feedback, which are not only essential to the future development of the theme/construct presented but also to the researcher’s personal development and learning.

• Fifthly, as alluded to above, the ethnographic comic is positioned between traditional presentation in academia and videography (Belk and Kozinets 2005). The ethnographic comic can be understood as a milestone practice for novice researchers aiming to eventually conduct a videography. The process of ‘drawing’ an ethnographic comic provides the researcher with an introduction into the complex process of managing visual data, learning how to use visual software, and conducting aesthetical critique of one’s creative work. We advise novice researchers with aspirations of conducting a videography to firstly take an ethnographic comic approach, as the learning from which will ultimately enhance the experience of eventually filming and editing a videography.

• Finally, drawing ethnographic comics using the ‘Comic Life’ software, does not require significant monetary investment from researchers, it is free on some Apple Macbook products and has a low cost of $29.99 otherwise. The learning from the engaging in the ethnographic comic approach surpasses the minor financial investment.
Discussion and Conclusion

Having outlined the process central to creating an ethnographic comic book, and the associated research benefits of engaging in such an approach, we now discuss the extent to which the ethnographic comic book can be considered scientific representation, and the extent to which it serves the theory-building objectives of consumer researchers.

The sequential steps discussed when creating an ethnographic comic, create the structure in which the researcher engages in the research processes of analysis and inferences. The relationship between the visual data, textual data, and theory incorporated provides a detailed visual means of developing a theme/construct, thus assisting the theory building objectives central to the research process. However, with regard to reporting research findings, a double crisis of representation and legitimization confronts ethnographers, and other qualitative researchers in the social sciences (Spiggle 1994). These works reflect a constant tension between liberating techniques and the desire to report objectively on the reality of Others' culture. The ethnographic comic book strikes an elegant balance, between the desire to provide resonance, emotion, and a sense of vividness of the Others’ culture and the necessity of portraying the culture in manner that offers a reality as loyal as possible to the context under investigation. The data-centric narrative, which incorporates textual and visual data, inherent to the ethnographic comic book approach, not only allows for a sense of a culture’s ‘lived’ emotion to be reported, but ensures a strong foundation in scientific rigor, due to the attention placed on veracity via the triangulation of data collection methods (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Stewart 1998). However, the ethnographic comic has many of the same challenges facing it as film: What is the ideal ratio of descriptive elements to more abstract theoretical elements (Kozinets and Belk 2006)? Further development of the ethnographic comic book approach will attempt to incorporate both theory building and data in an organic, yet tandem fashion.
References


