

Customer value and autoethnography: subjective personal introspection and the meanings of a photograph collection

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Abstract

This paper applies the method of subjective personal introspection (SPI or autoethnography) to the analysis of a photograph collection from the viewpoint of implications concerning the nature and types of customer value. Borrowing from the branch of philosophy known as axiology, this focus emphasizes the centrality of customer or consumer value to the basic foundation for marketing and the essence of consumer value as an interactive relativistic preference experience. This conceptualization leads to a typology of customer value that serves as a lens or perspective to guide the interpretive analysis of photographs from a family archive. In sum, overall, the purpose of the paper is to demonstrate that consumer value (axiology) serves as a useful framework that furthers the application of SPI (autoethnography) to an interpretation of the meanings found in a photograph collection (archival artifacts).

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1. Introduction

1.1. Subjective personal introspection (SPI or autoethnography)

Several years ago, I introduced an approach to consumer research that I refer to as subjective personal introspection (SPI). As originally conceived (Holbrook, 1986, 1995), as adopted by some (Gould, 1991, 1995), and as critiqued by others (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993), SPI focuses on impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer's own private consumption experiences. The goal of SPI—descending from Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century—is to produce an essay that sheds light on some aspect of humanity as reflected in the everyday life of the consumer in general and the author in particular. To paraphrase Montaigne, I believe that—because I am human—when I write about myself, I inevitably describe some aspect of the human condition.

When pressed for a “scientific justification” of such practices, I reply that SPI amounts to a form of participant observation or observant participation in one's own life. In

effect, SPI constructs a sort of autoethnography via which the author enjoys privileged access to the relevant phenomena of interest (for a review of such debates, see Holbrook, 1995).

When further critiqued, attacked, and maligned by the proponents of neopositivism in marketing research, I smile sadly and suggest an analogy with the camera. As the old adage tells us, cameras do not lie. Of course, it is possible to propagate falsehoods using a camera—say, by framing the picture in a misleading way, by cropping selectively, or by using digital processing to distort the original image. However, in general, we trust the representations provided by a photo finish in horse racing, an instant replay in baseball, or the Mac Cam at the U.S. Open because “we” (i.e., the smart people at places like Kodak who comprehend the relevant physics, chemistry, and optics of light, film, and lenses) have constructed the camera, understand how it works, and therefore have some reason to certify the veracity of its output. Clearly, on analogous grounds, society has reason to trust the SPI of a serious scholar precisely because—through the process of socialization (by parents, siblings, teachers, religious leaders, and so on)—society has itself constructed the relevant instrument of observation. If society does not wish to trust the instrument that it has itself constructed, then so much the worse for society.

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1.2. The photographic essay (archival artifacts)

However, SPI does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it requires inputs of the author's memories—recollections that are potentially susceptible to mental lapses. Because such memories are inherently suspect, they gain enhanced trustworthiness if they can be supported by relevant historical materials—memoirs, memorabilia, and mementos of various kinds. The need for such support elevates the importance of photographs and other archival artifacts that bear on the topics, themes, ideas, and issues of interest.

As increasingly deployed ever more widely by social scientists (sociologists, anthropologists, and ethnographers) and consumer researchers (including many of my closest friends and colleagues), such photographs play a triple role in autoethnography (see, e.g., Heisley and Levy, 1991; Zaltman, 1997). First, photos prompt SPI-based recollections via the process of “autodriving,” “photoelicitation,” or “metaphor elicitation.” Second, they help to substantiate claims made by the author. Third, they assist in conveying a sense of the relevant consumption experiences to the reader or audience with more clarity, vividness, and realism than would be possible by means of words alone. This tripartite set of benefits has brought the photographic essay into consumer research in ways that have greatly boosted the power of our ethnographic or SPI-based analyses (Holbrook, 2003; Holbrook and Kuwahara, 1998).

1.3. Customer value (axiology)

However, even with the help of photographs, the autoethnographically inclined consumer researcher faces the challenge of imposing some degree of order on his or her materials. In this connection, we might identify two polar-opposite approaches to addressing this problem.

One way of achieving a sense of structure—by far the more common of the two diametrically opposed approaches—starts with the raw materials and builds from there, allowing a cohesive conceptualization to emerge from the data in the manner recommended by (among many others) Anselm Strauss under the heading of “grounded theory.”

At the other extreme—via a far less common approach of a type explored here—one might begin with a conceptual framework developed a priori, based on insights borrowed more from philosophical ideation than from empirical observation, and used as a guide or lens for interpreting the available visual data.

Needless to say, these two extreme approaches could be and have been combined in various ways. Indeed, such a tacking back and forth between the generalities of a broad conceptual overview and the particulars of a close textual reading is the essence of the virtues claimed for the celebrated *hermeneutic circle*, viewed as a “cybernetic” (rather than as a “vicious”) cycle that incorporates a self-correcting feedback loop. Nonetheless, in the present essay, I wish to illustrate the potential value of an a priori

conceptual scheme in imposing a sense of structure on an otherwise dauntingly amorphous autoethnographic analysis of archival artifacts.

Specifically, I shall utilize a previously developed typology of customer or consumer value as a lens through which to view and a guide via which to organize a set of photographic materials. This value typology emerged from a prolonged scrutiny of the literature in a branch of philosophy known as axiology and concerned with developing the theory of value. I have been playing with these ideas for a couple of decades. They recently culminated in a book entitled *Consumer Value: A Framework for Analysis and Research* (ed. Holbrook, 1999) with contributions on different types of customer value by a distinguished list of colleagues that included France Leclerc and Bernd Schmitt, Rich Oliver, Mike Solomon, Marsha Richins, Kent Grayson, Janet Wagner, Craig Smith, and Stephen “SFX” Brown. These authors were kind enough to use the value typology as a launching pad for their own reflections concerning the relevant type of value on which each is a highly regarded expert. The resulting volume provides a rather detailed account of customer value in the consumption experience.

Briefly, if we accept the Kotlerian definition of marketing as managerial activities that lead toward the facilitation and consummation of exchanges and if we follow Kotler and Levy in regarding an exchange as a trading relationship between two parties in which each gives up something of value in return for something of greater value, it follows immediately that customer value is the basic foundation for everything we do in marketing. It therefore behooves us to understand customer value to the fullest extent possible. Yet, heretofore, efforts in that direction have been rather fragmented and unsystematic. In *Consumer Value*, we attempt to narrow this gap in our understanding.

We define consumer value as an (1) interactive, (2) relativistic [(a) comparative, (b) personal, and (c) situational], (3) preference, and (4) experience. Specifically, (1) customer value is *interactive* in the sense that it involves a relationship between some subject (a consumer) and some object (a product). Further, (2) customer value is *relativistic* insofar as (a) it reflects a comparison of one object with another, (b) it differs between one person and the next, and (c) it depends on the situation in which the evaluation occurs. Given such considerations, (3) customer value embodies a *preference* variously referred to by such terms as like/dislike, favorable/unfavorable, good/bad, positive/negative, pro/con, or approach/avoid. Finally, (4) such an interactive relativistic preference attaches *not* to the object itself but *rather* to the relevant consumption *experience* (involving fantasies, feelings, fun, and other aspects of customer satisfaction from product usage).

This conception of the nature of customer value leads to a typology that appears in Table 1. The typology reflects three underlying dimensions, treated for simplicity as dichotomous distinctions. First, extrinsic value prizes some product or experience as a means to an end (utilitarian, instrumental, and

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