

Alcohol abstinence and consumption reduction: Emotions and identity negotiations

Track: Doctoral Colloquium

Abstract

This paper focuses on the proposed methodology of a PhD study that addresses the emotions and identity negotiations of alcohol abstainers or occasional drinkers. The majority of the previous studies on social marketing and alcohol have focused on current binge and excessive drinkers, but little attention has been paid to consumers who change their behaviour and decide to reduce their consumption or completely abstain. Understanding about these abstainers and occasional drinkers will provide better insights on how challenging the transition from drinker to abstainer is and what needs to be incorporated in social marketing initiatives to make the transition smooth and to sustain the healthy behaviour. Hence, this study aims to uncover positive and negative emotions and identity negotiations that young consumers experience during the process of giving up excessive alcohol consumption. Social and Self-identity theories are used to illuminate these emotions and identities. Therefore, narrative analysis and diary method are proposed as a suitable research method as it can provide rich data on identity and emotions during a transformation of consumption. This paper focuses on the methodology aspect of this study emphasising the suitability of narratives and diary methods drawing on certain challenges and issues that need to be addressed by researchers while adopting these methods.

Key words: Social Marketing, Alcohol, Narrative analysis, Diary method.

1. Introduction

An All-Party Parliamentary Group's report, the Alcohol Misuse Manifesto (2015) stated that "*We are experiencing nothing short of a national crisis in the UK because of alcohol: we need to act now to stop it*" (pp. 4). This declaration reveals the insurmountable problem that the UK has faced over the years due to alcohol. In order to tackle the problem there is a growing interest in social marketing initiatives (Hastings & Angus, 2011). However, many studies related to social marketing have focused on current alcohol consumers who are engaged in risky consumption habits. In contrast, abstainers and occasional drinkers who transit their behaviour from risky consumption to less risky consumption have received little attention in studies (Fry, 2014). These individuals can experience various physical, psychological and social struggles which can even cause them to relapse into drinking again (King & Tucker, 2000). Surprisingly the extant research on social marketing and alcohol has largely focused on existing drinkers in order to promote a one-off decision to stop drinking or adopt responsible drinking practices at the expense of looking at *sustaining* the healthy consumption behaviour (Lefebvre, 2011). Hence, there is a clear need to explore impeding and supporting factors experienced by consumers that have an impact on sustaining healthy consumption behaviour. Thus, this PhD study addresses this gap by contributing to the understanding these impeding and supporting factors to sustain the behavioural change. This is done by focusing on the emotions and identity negotiations experienced by young consumers when giving up alcohol significantly or entirely. This paper begins with a brief discussion of the research gap and then largely focuses on the suitability and challenges of using narrative inquiry method and the diary method as data collection methods.

2. Research Gap

Many early social marketing initiatives interpreted alcohol consumption as a rational, cognitive decision (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014). However, other authors see it as culturally embedded symbolic or hedonic consumption (Heath, 2000; Szmigin et al., 2011; Szmigin et al., 2008). Subsequently, in this context, individuals who reject alcohol entirely or reduce their consumption significantly could experience various positive and negative emotions and identity negotiations. These emotions and identities are particularly important to sustain the healthy behaviour because consumers compare costs and benefits in order to be motivated to adopt and sustain certain behaviour (Crespo & Rundle-Thiele, 2015). Therefore, these negative emotions and identity struggles can impede the sustainability of behavioural change and positive emotions and identities can support the sustainability of this change. For example Cherrier & Gurrieri (2014) suggested that even consumers who voluntarily disengage from alcohol consumption face various emotional struggles and negative experiences. Individuals who reject alcohol consumption suffer social stigmatisation, exclusion (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2011), tension, shame (Piacentini et al., 2012; DeVisser & Smith, 2007) and negative stereotypes (Piacentini & Banister, 2006). Fry (2014) conducted a study with alcohol abstinent respondents and revealed that alcohol reduction practices were described as "illuminating", "stressful", "confronting" and "emotional", both personally and socially (pp. 216). This can become particularly stressful if there is lack of social support (Kennett-Hensel et al., 2012) **as the individual is giving up emotional benefits and disengaging from their previous identity.** Theoretically, social and self-identity theories explain various emotional outcomes and behavioural struggles during identity transitions (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker, 1977). On the other hand, the consumer behaviour literature as a whole has mostly overlooked the disposition behaviour in the consumption cycle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and identity transition (Bonsu & Belk, 2003). During an identity transition consumers try to negotiate with new identities through new roles, which can be disruptive for their wellbeing in many situations (Schouten, 1991; Roster, 2013). Surprisingly social marketing, as a discipline that

focuses on societal well-being, has largely ignored these emotional and identity aspects of transition which are important in sustaining healthy behaviour. Social marketers have largely neglected the issue of *sustaining* the healthy behaviour (Scammon et al., 2011; Berger & Rand, 2008; Lefebvre, 2011). Rather, they have focused on one-shot initiatives (Berger & Rand, 2008) which can result in relapses (King & Tucker, 2000). The few discussions in the health literature have been focused on negative physical and mental consequences and have focused on problem drinkers open to clinical observation (King & Tucker, 2000). Yet as consuming alcohol is a social act it should also be investigated from the perspective of the social sciences rather than just medical frameworks (Dietler, 2006). As a consequence, there is a strong need to focus on sustaining healthy behaviours by exploring the emotional challenges, positive emotions, coping and negotiation mechanisms which occur during the process of giving up alcohol.

Therefore, the research question is:

“What are the emotions and identity negotiations experienced by consumers when giving up alcohol consumption entirely or significantly and how do these affect the extent to which healthy consumption behaviour is sustained?”

In order to answer the above research question the study will focus on the following objectives:

1. To explore *what* the individuals’ positive and negative emotions are when giving up excessive alcohol consumption voluntarily (by choice) or involuntarily (by coercion).
2. To understand *what* difficulties are experienced in sustaining the healthy consumption behaviour and identity negotiation practices during the process of giving up excessive drinking.
3. To understand *why* these emotions and identity negotiations emerge during the abstinence and reduction process.
4. To offer recommendations for social marketing practitioners and health-policy makers about *how* to overcome challenges during the transition phase that will help sustain healthy consumption behaviour.

3. Proposed Methodology

This research borrows heavily from interpretivist and social constructivist paradigms. The boundaries between these paradigms are rather blurred and they are not mutually exclusive (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Drawing from both paradigms we believe that social world is contextual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and individuals construct the “reality” of the social world, which leads to multiple realities (Shankar & Goulding, 2001). Therefore, the goal of this study is not about seeking *the* truth, as it can never be proven (Shankar & Goulding, 2001). Rather the study tries to understand and explain *a* perspective of truth from the viewpoint of the consumer. The authors of this study acknowledge that the emotions and identity struggles are context specific and multiple. However, at the same time we believe that within these multiple realities common stories will emerge, and they can be examined through deep investigations (Pereira, 2006). However, many researchers have given less attention to the fact that the consumer is a human with subjective and a complex behaviour. Thus previous studies on motivation to quit alcohol consumption or reduce alcohol intake have mostly adopted a positivistic approach (See Paswan et al., 2015; Downey et al., 2001; Rinker & Neighbours, 2014; Charney et al., 2010) with the notable exception of interpretivist and social constructivist studies conducted by Cherrier & Gurrieri (2014), Hackley et al., (2013), Fry (2010, 2014). Further, marketing is a discipline which has evolved and is viewed as a socially constructed enterprise (Hirschman, 1986). Thompson (1982) referred to the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” which describes the problem of objectivising these social constructs. Therefore, it is important to use humanistic modes to investigate or explore a socially

constructed phenomenon (Marsden & Littler, 1996) in which the researcher becomes a part of the system being studied (Hirschman, 1986). The outcome of humanistic inquiry is *an* interpretation of constructs rather than providing *the* objective truth. In this context the researcher should keep faith on their own sensitivity and empathic insightfulness when exposed to the thoughts, beliefs, values and realities constructed by others.

Interpretivists oppose the application of scientific methods, as they cannot measure constant meanings given by respondents (Bryman, 2006). Accordingly, understanding any human and social behaviour demands methods that can identify shared meanings within a context through language, rituals and gestures (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). It must be understood that marketing as a discipline that involves the human world, is different from the natural, physical world, and therefore, must be studied differently (Riessman, 2008). Thus, it is important to adopt a methodology that involves interpretive, naturalistic approaches to the world, i.e. the qualitative approach. Some alcohol related studies have used qualitative methodologies in order to gain a deep understanding of meanings and their context (See Szmigin et al., 2008; Hackley et al., 2013; Griffin et al., 2009). However, surprisingly most of the youth alcohol related studies have taken quantitative approaches (See Paswan et al., 2015; Downey et al., 2001; Rinker & Neighbours, 2014; Charney et al., 2010). As the aim of this study is to understand phenomena in detail we use two qualitative methods to collect data - narrative inquiry interviews and a diary method. Using these two methods in conjunction will help us to build a richer and more holistic representation (Shankar & Patterson, 2001) of emotions and identity negotiation practices when consumers give up alcohol entirely or significantly. Further, using multiple methods would provide greater breath of understanding of the phenomenon (Stern et al., 1998).

3.1 Narrative Inquiry method

Narratives are universal to any culture and so closer to every day human life. Riessman (2008) has defined narrative analysis as a “method of interpreting texts that have in common storied form” (pp.11). Shankar et al. (2001) argue that narratives have much to offer in consumer research especially in consumption and identity. Therefore, by using narratives we will be able to adopt a rich framework through which we can investigate the ways that humans experience the world depicted through their stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The narrative approach is underpinned by the notion that realities are multiple and socially constructed and the social world does not exist independently of the people who interact with it (Shankar et al., 2001). Thus, this is congruent with the philosophical assumptions chosen by us in this study. The epistemology in narrative enables the truth to emerge from data (Riessman, 2008) and methodologically, narrative analysis borrows heavily from hermeneutics which is theory of interpreting meanings.

Ricoeur (2002) suggested that narratives can be used to uncover the concept of *identity* because through story telling (lived experiences), individuals or groups construct identities. Therefore, by allowing consumers to tell a story we allow them to create a world and represent themselves in that world (Schiffrin, 1996). Further, young people place a greater importance on stories in their day to day lives (Tutenges & Rod, 2009). Therefore, narrative analysis is a suitable approach for this study because the study focuses largely on young people’s identity and emotions. Narratives will enable us to find out how abstainers or near abstainers represent themselves in the culture of intoxication. It will allow exploration of how they have changed over time and what challenges they faced in their story of becoming an abstainer or an occasional drinker. Further, it has been argued that this method is more suitable than many other qualitative methods to study a life turning point (Hawkins & Saleem, 2012; Gaviria & Bluemelhuber, 2010; Barrios et al., 2012). The young people who have

decided to stop or reduce consuming alcohol are in a transition stage; thus narratives will be useful to reveal how these individuals, at this turning point, try to make sense of their current life, thereby uniting their future and past (Barrios et al., 2012). Some previous studies on alcohol consumption have used a narrative inquiry method to understand the alcohol consumption phenomena in detail (see Griffin et al. (2009) using narratives to understand loss of consciousness and memory due to drinking; Cherrier & Gurrieri (2014) using narratives to understand institutional role in alcohol abstinence).

The use of this method in vast variety of disciplines has created confusions and disagreements about its domain, concepts and constructs (Grayson, 1997). Therefore, various scholars argue for different ways of employing it (Riessman, 2008). Narrative research often takes a qualitative approach to data collection (Goodson & Gill, 2011; Riessman, 2008) such as loosely structured interviews (See Shankar et al., 2001), critical incident techniques (See Burns et al., 2000) and focus groups (See Griffin et al., 2009). In all these data collection approaches narratives take a loosely formatted approach and take the perspective of the teller rather than the society (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This would help the researcher to understand the identity of the consumer from consumer's point of view. In narrative analysis rather than focusing on categorisation, the analyst should focus on how and why a particular event is storied and what the narrator wants to say through the story (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, the narrator's world, or context, is important in narrative analysis. We should note that the meaning of narrative will be lost if it divorced from the context (Mishler, 1986) and it is therefore important to understand the living context of the abstainers. For example, it may be easy for a young person to live in a culture where alcohol is not a major part of their everyday life and they may be unlikely to experience any emotions or identity struggles. In contrast, a young person living in the United Kingdom where alcohol is major part of their student life (Piacentini et al., 2012), making the decision to give up alcohol is suggested to create struggles and various emotions. Thus, in this study, context plays a major role in consumer life.

While it is understood that there are different ways of collecting narratives (Creswell, 2009), face-to-face interviewing is often considered the most effective primary method of data collection (Riessman, 2008) due to the time constraints and the nature of the final sample. Long interviews have been selected as the best approach to obtain individuals' narratives for this study (McCracken, 1986; Riessman, 2008) as they have been successfully used by consumer researchers in many instances (e.g.; Fry, 2010; Szmigin et al., 2008; Stern et al., 1998; Shankar et al., 2001). Narrative interviews help to construct a story which generates detailed accounts (Mishler, 1986). This is in accordance with the assumptions about the socially constructed nature of reality discussed previously. Hence, we propose to adopt an approach of asking open ended questions that allows the respondent to construct a narrative freely. As mentioned previously it is always important to focus on the context in which the narrator lives. Therefore, it is also important to narrate the story by adding observations and informal chats before and after the interview (Thompson et al., 1989). As the questions are loosely structured, the researcher should always be prepared to formulate questions based on the answers given by the respondents (Stern et al., 1998) as this will help to get a fuller description about the consumption experience. It is important to note that in narratives, participants may talk about their past and present, uniting them with the future (Thompson et al., 1989). Therefore, this is a complicated task for the informant and the researcher needs to understand and support this through different probing questions.

Telling drinking stories is a major part of young people's lives and is considered an entertainment between certain friendship groups (Griffin et al., 2009). Yet, stories by non – drinkers are mostly untold and unheard, but could also be a major part of young people's lives. Therefore, the researcher aims to examine deeper meanings and interpretations of the experience of abstainers through this face-to-face interaction, relying on verbal accounts of social reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It is important to consciously understand the challenges and consistently make efforts to see the subject matter from different perspectives. We need to understand that the interview setting, interviewee and the double edge nature of language has implication for the study (Alvesson, 2003). In order to overcome these challenges we will aim to establish a genuine rapport with the interviewee (Alvesson, 2003) as it will make it easier for the interviewee to tell their stories of giving up alcohol and the emotions involved in it. Alvesson (2003) describes this as *romanticism* in interviewing which emphasises advocating a more genuine human interaction by establishing rapport, trust and commitment between the interviewer and the interviewee. Further, as Alvesson (2003) mentions, another main challenge in this study will be respondents who try to be “moral storytellers” and will try to portray a positive image of them. “The interviewee maybe assumed to act in his or her own interest and interest of the social group which she or he identified” (Alvesson, 2003; pp, 21). In this context they will omit certain things in their narrative and will only reveal favourable information. Therefore, it is important to cross probe insights by asking “could you tell me more about it?” This will help the interviewee to provide more detailed information.

There are other challenges in using the narrative methodology. When collecting narratives it is important to ensure that they are connected to a lived experience and not a fantasy and that the researcher has grasped the real idea behind the narrative (Hawkins & Saleem, 2012). In order to ensure this, researchers can probe, have follow up interviews, work to understand the context and share the transcripts with the interviewees (Mishler, 1986). It is also argued that this methodology is challenging since the researcher needs to gather the maximum information they can from a limited number of stories (Stern et al., 1998). Furthermore, not all people are able to tell stories to describe the events of their lives (Frank, 2000). We can try to overcome these challenges by allowing participants to voice their stories without any structured questions and also encourage them to present their experiences as they remember and without fragmentation (Mishler, 1986). Further, one of the biggest challenges in this method is that whilst narratives can capture what is said by respondents, it cannot capture what is not said or forgotten. These silent or forgotten elements might represent the most important dynamics in a story (Grayson, 1997). During a narrative, the teller will actively select what is important and what is not important to them (Hawkins & Saleem, 2012). This can lead to omission of some elements of the story which the researcher may find interesting, but the teller does not recognise as such. We decided to adopt diary method to overcome some of these issues and obtain richer data.

3.2 Diary Method

Although this method is not widely used in marketing research it has received attention and support from marketing scholars as an innovative way of capturing rich insights about consumers (Patterson, 2005). This method is heavily used in psychology, education, health and feminist studies (Patterson & Hogg, 2004). People provide in-depth information through diaries which they are unable to articulate orally (Patterson, 2005). Hence, diary method can be suitable to provide some new insights that cannot be captured through narrative interviews. Diaries are defined as “self-reported instruments used repeatedly to examine ongoing experiences”; they “offer the opportunity to investigate social, psychological and

physiological processes within everyday situations” (Bolger et al., 2003, p. 580). They can be used to capture particulars of experience in a way that is not possible using traditional designs (Zarantonello & Luomala, 2011). As is the case with interviews, this method enables information based on respondent’s point of view to be captured (Bolger et al., 2003). The less time elapsed between the actual event and reporting will help to achieve more accurate and in depth information about the events. It is suitable to investigate psychological and behavioural aspects of consumers within everyday situations (Zarantonello & Luomala, 2011). On the other hand, it creates the opportunity for informants to reflect on their everyday identity negotiations and express opinions, feelings and emotions that they may not have felt comfortable talking about during the narrative interviews (Siemieniako & Kubacki, 2013). According to Bolger et al., (2003) this method is more appropriate if the research objective is to establish the nature of the psychological changes and experiences a person undergoes over time. As mentioned before this PhD study is focusing on change attendant upon a consumption decision. Hence, this method can explore these differences well and fully. Further, a diary can also show how an individual’s interest varies over time (See Tennen et al., 1991). It would not be possible for the researcher to live with the abstainers and experience their emotions over time. Therefore, diaries provide a record of activities and thoughts which occurred in their natural environment, uninfluenced by the presence of the researcher (Siemieniako & Kubacki, 2013). The diary method that we propose to adopt in this study is event based diaries (Bolger et al., 2003) where participants will be asked to write whenever there is an occasion at which they have to interact with alcohol, a desire to use alcohol or any event that they had to participate in with alcohol present. They will recount any emotions they felt during these events and the coping strategies they used. This approach has used by Zarantonello & Luomala (2011) in order to understand the chocolate consumption behaviour of consumers. Yet, we should be careful of giving too many instructions as it can lose the participants interest and hamper creativity (Patterson, 2005, Siemieniako & Kubacki, 2013). Hence, it is important to strike a balance between the instructions and freedom given to the participant. Siemieniako & Kubacki (2013) used this type of non-directive diary to understand alcohol consumption among Polish female students. Diaries can be either written by hand or electronically, based on the preference of informant. In this study we can adopt the *online diary* which is more suitable for the target group and it is also easy to monitor. The time range of keeping diaries in reported studies varies from five days to four months (Siemieniako & Kubacki, 2013). We have decided to ask participants to keep the diaries for two months in order to capture as many events as possible whilst considering the feasibility and the time limits of PhD research. One of the main challenges of this method is to obtain a high level of commitment from the informants. The researcher should be able to ask informants if there is anything unclear or not completed in the diary. In order to motivate the respondents, we are planning to offer a small financial incentive and continuously keep in touch with diary respondents to encourage them to fill the diary. Another challenge can be genuine forgetfulness where participants forget to enter their diary entries and later try to reconstruct and fabricate the missed entries (Bolger et al., 2003). However, as we decided to continuously monitor the diary entries and send continuous reminders in order to overcome this barrier.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, as the researcher borrows heavily from interpretivism and social constructionism and given the research aims of this study, there is a strong need to adopt a methodology that can facilitate the development of understanding of the deep meanings that consumers share. Hence, narrative methodology through in-depth interviews and the diary method is most suitable for this study. However, both these methods have different challenges that we should acknowledge and should try to overcome.

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