Not Waving but Drowning: A Story of Consumer Profiling in the Digital Age

Abstract

The authors of this paper are aware that its narrative presentational format deviates substantially from the normative scholarly conventions and expectations of a 5-page AM submission. It is also no mere coincidence that the title of our paper resonates with the critically acclaimed work of ‘Stevie’ Smith (1957), in the sense that we seek to question whether our discipline is cresting a tidal wave of digital enlightenment or simply drowning in the promise of misappropriated opportunity. Responding to a resurgence of interest, within leading management debates, for alternative, scholarly modes of expression (e.g. Colville et al., 2009; 2012; Stern, 1998), our storytelling approach (Boje, 1991, 2001; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Kearney, 2001; Weick, 2012) contributes a methodologically multifaceted, empirically-sourced narrative which centralises a case study-based account to consider the topic of consumer profiling. Drawing primarily from the findings of separately conducted, in-depth qualitative studies our story pertains to the divergent yet interconnected dimensions of marketing consumption, education, research and practice. Consequently, we frame a number of fundamental questions which seek to probe the scope, purpose, direction and responsibility of our disciplinary endeavour.

Keywords: Consumer Profiling; Data Mining; Storytelling; Managerial Implementation; Marketing Pedagogy

Track: Marketing Case Studies
“It is a sad fact that the academic world which, in its educational role, should be devoted to communication above all else, exhibits pseudo-tribal isolating languages as extreme as criminal slang. The excuse is that precision of expression demands it. This is true up to a point, but the point is frequently and blatantly exceeded” (Morris, 1969, p. 13). Maybe, as Gabriel (2000, p. 1) suggests, a good story, a story which entertains, explains, inspires and educates, will enable us to overcome such a barrier?

9:03am – Liverpool, UK

The accompanying vibrations intensified as the piercing polyphonic shrill of the mobile telephone’s alarm resonates throughout the bedroom’s dark shadows; a room partially illuminated only by the intermittent red glow emitted from a tiny flashing LED located in the upper corner of the telephone handset. John1 reaches over to freeze the disturbance that has cruelly resurrected him from his dream-fuelled slumber at such an untimely moment. The colourful, 2-inch display screen on the mobile device instantly fuses to his blossoming state of awareness as it reveals the familiar iconic symbol that can only indicate a new SMS has been received. The daily, habitual routine progresses as the television is turned on, the PC booted-up, the text message is replied to and a quick morning call to his girlfriend takes place. John’s morning TV news channel of choice is selected, his Facebook page rapidly updated, tacit memories of the previous night’s alcohol-fuelled exploits Tweeted, and a couple of emails received from his parents many weeks ago suddenly become less difficult to reply to as the forthcoming ‘reading week’ schedule allows family commitments to take place back at home. 30-minutes later, John reaches for his car keys, finishes the last mouthful of coffee and heads into university. The journey is less eventful than expected as a plethora of ubiquitous roadside safety cameras are passed; today’s notable additions also include a tax disc recognition check and a rather intriguing vehicle tyre-tread depth-monitoring mat that the local constabulary has spread across the road just outside of the fuel-filling station. The garage forecourt, a beaming lightshow of CCTV cameras, beckons and since he suspects that he is now likely to be in the full, scrutinising view of someone, somewhere, John tries to perfect his stylish look, offering the coolest, manly walking gait possible as he saunters over to the kiosk to pay the personality-devoid clerk with his credit card. Swiping his student card at the front barriers to a rapidly-filling university car park moments later, a rather-too-tight parking space is hesitantly located, and into the lecture theatre he heads anticipating a riveting presentation on consumer profiling in the digital age.

Week five’s lecture passes quickly, despite his fears that he’d be singled out for not yet having downloaded the module handbook. Skipping the day’s tutorial, John soon finds himself laughing at a group of Burberry-clad teenage girls being scolded for dropping litter by a voice-equipped CCTV camera on the short-cut to his bank’s nearest cash-point machine. Searching his mobile device he locates the correct PIN code for his debit card before withdrawing enough of his overdraft facility to sustain a determined high street shopping assault. Negotiating a myriad of metal-gated, security-facilitating entry barriers at the entrances to each of the retail stores he enters, the shopping trip proves a suitably enjoyable escape from the interminable pressures of obtaining that seemingly essential 2:1 degree result that his parents and, no doubt, any future employer will expect. A newly opened Tesco store located just off campus provides the opportunity to hunt for discounted Levi’s jeans, buy-one-get-one-free boxes of lager, seemingly over-the-top security boxed, tagged and video-recorded Gillette razor blades, cut-price bread and milk, and desperately expensive but vibrantly packaged condoms, before heading through the never-ending checkout process and redeeming an

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1 Access to the representative lifestyle activities of the individual detailed within this section of our narrative account was generated through the analysis of qualitative diary research (QDR) data which documented the lives of 122 undergraduate students (Author, 2012).
inordinate number of Clubcard points. He might not have needed plastic bags, he didn’t want school
vouchers, and he could probably handle the process of putting his own purchases into his rather tatty,
6-week-old, ‘bag-for-life’ but at least he had a Clubcard. Every little helps, thought John.

Back at home and another day has passed so quickly. Sat on the sofa, breaking-in his new Levi’s, John
jokes with his flatmates about the lecture he’d had that day. “My lecturer’s paranoid”, he quipped,
“basically selling us the idea of some kind of Big Brother reality.” Flipping the lid on his laptop,
scanning his fingerprint and logging in, he is determined to establish the veracity and potential of
RFID technology for himself. Whilst sipping his beer, the Sky News channel, in its surround-sound
enhanced HD glory, broadcasts a breaking story on the capturing and sentencing of a murderer, found
guilty of a crime that took place nearly 20-years ago, by way of advances in DNA science (Sinclair,
2010). Recalling how his day had begun, John muses over the lecture reported possibilities of a dream-
recording device (Cerf et al., 2010), ponders the benefits of audience monitoring activities within
cinema auditoria (Wagner, 2010), fantasizes about the possibility of owning an invisibility cloak
(Chen et al., 2011) and wonders whether the gymnasium should be visited a few times before braving
the terminal scanning process at Manchester airport (BBC, 2010) on the way to his Club 18-30
summer rep’s job later that year. He hopes his new ‘bells and whistles’ biometric data-loaded passport
(Twist, 2004; Bailey, 2006) will arrive on time...

* 9:32am - Nottingham, UK

Patrick apologises unreservedly for his late arrival to the meeting with the company’s newest clients,
the marketing team of ‘Rat Race’ - a high street fashion retailer looking to pursue an ambitious store
expansion strategy within the UK market - pulling those customer insight reports together in time had
certainly been a challenge. The career route to his operational level of data consultancy management
had taken nearly forty years to achieve and, like his erstwhile colleagues, he too was looking to the
future. However, unlike most of his marketing-savvy colleagues, his dreams were of beginning a new
life in that recently purchased cottage in Northern France and they were drawing nearer by the day.
Nonetheless, today’s priorities were quickly pulled to the fore and the challenges again posed a very
familiar theme to those he had faced when he first joined the credit referencing organisation that had
now become a global force in data consultancy.

The Rat Race team, led by the officious Edward Hall - or, Ted of Toadhall as Patrick often labels him
within internal meetings - were eager to thrash out their concerns. There were problems with the
profiling typologies that Patrick’s team had provided. “We don’t see it!” Ted retorts. He continues,
uninterrupted, “Our customers are 18-24 years old, they’re adventurous, they’re edgy, they surf, they
climb mountains, they set up camp in tents on the outer limits of the Scottish Highlands. Quite frankly,
they live on their adrenalin”, he demands. Patrick metaphorically bites the bullet: “Er, well, actually
they don’t”, he nervously stutters. “I’ll be honest with you Ted, they’re actually more like me. In many
ways they might wish they weren’t in their late fifties, they pursue the ideals of youth, they’d love to go
surfing, climb mountains and live on the edge of existence through the brutal winters of the Scottish
Highlands, but, er, they don’t. They’ve never been on a surfboard in their lives. They couldn’t climb a
mountain to save their lives. And, whilst they love your winter jacket range, they rave about your
functional pants, and they dream about your body temperature regulating thermal gear, you won’t see

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2 Retailer identity has been concealed to maintain a confidentiality agreement in terms of sharing sensitive corporate
information. The retailer concerned reported an operating profit of £19.4 m in 2010.
3 The data consultancy providing organisational access to the case material drawn upon within this narrative account
currently maintains global revenues in excess of $4 billion and operates in 41 countries.
this stuff in action in the Scottish Highlands, Ted. Although you might see it at the weekly autumnal farmers’ market in St. Malo”, he, perhaps unnecessarily, elaborates to seal his point.

Ted, looks sideways, to his recently-recruited, 2:1-resplendent graduate, a snappy dressing assistant marketing manager called Rateeb Waters, and hands over the baton. “Yeah, interesting take, Patrick, and thanks for your work on this”, chirped Rateeb, “but we’ve also looked at the data and wanted to discuss a few observations.” Here we go, thought Patrick. He’d seen this scenario so many times before and, to make matters worse, during this particular encounter he struggles to shake the Kenneth Grahame–inspired (cf. 1993) Ratty and Toad metaphor from his mind as Rateeb stands in front of the sleep-inducing, bullet-pointed-to-death, PowerPointed glow and begins to reveal his analyses: “Basically, we took the data from various sources, including the e-data from our site, DVLA data, loyalty card data, in store transaction data, some omnibus stuff and some of our own insights before shaping these qual descriptors. We’ve run this a few ways and clustered around some of the key triggers”, he explains. “And this is where we’re at. We don’t see the typologies you’ve got there, Patrick. We feel that our customers are like this guy, let’s call him John. He’s most likely a student, lives in a student flat, drives a small car, say something like a second-hand VW Polo. He uses a Tesco Clubcard, occasionally buys discounted clothing - probably so he can still afford our cool, aspirational stuff - he drinks a fair amount of alcohol and keeps up-to-date with his mates via Facebook and Twitter. He’s young, okay, 18-24, likes going out in groups with his mates, chasing women, and he loves living on the edge!”. Rateeb pauses.

Patrick senses an awkward tension in the air and wonders how he can placate the situation. It was a familiar problem (cf. Wright and Esslemont, 1994; Author, 2009): “Yes, I agree that you could find different shopper typologies within your data, it’s easily done, especially when clustering”, Patrick suggests. “You see, clustering’s a problem”, he glances at Ted, “you decide to segment, you grab some data, you select the variables and you run with the algorithm. You then look at the options, i.e. the segments that appeal, pick the ones you like the look of and ditch the rest (Wensley, 1995). Dare I say it, but the process is, some would argue, at best a little arbitrary (Hoek et al., 1996). In some ways the problem we’ve got, Ted, is that we have far too much data to use in this way. Why cluster when you could take all the data available and run with the segment of one? (Dibb, 2001). “So, we have to be pragmatic in this situation and we have to look at the behavioural and the needs-based elements and we have access to all the data imaginable that will enable us to do that. We have more than enough data and we’ve been doing this long enough to recognise the problems that can be encountered, especially in terms of constructing rather than identifying the managerially-desired outcome (Gummesson, 2003). The reality is that, yes, the likes of John do buy in your store, but they’re probably buying for their fathers. In fact, if we look at the other ‘segment’ that you decided to bin, that probably contains me. We earn more, we’re a sizeable demographic, we recognise the values in your brand, if you wanted to reach us you could, but you won’t find us on a Club 18-30 holiday or on a surfboard or halfway up a mountain, Ted.” The meeting draws to an awkward close and the situation is left open for debate. ‘Toad’ and ‘Ratty’ don’t see, or don’t want to see, the profiles Patrick’s team have offered and, to this day, they still don’t. Patrick and his team decide it makes sense to run with a compromise, conceding that they were being paid by the client after all.

*3:05pm - Southampton, UK*

The summer sun burns brightly on the final day of the 2012 Academy of Marketing conference and numerous tracks are subsequently taking place in the customary presentational format. PowerPoint glows, bullets point and fledgling scholars nervously hesitate behind a military procession of closed doors. Professors Raker and Frown simultaneously reflect on the state of our marketing field, the
relevance of marketing education to its various stakeholders, and the unimaginable possibilities that those rapidly evolving contemporary developments in the availability of data and the use of sophisticated software are allowing scope for in the digital age (Han et al., 2012; Wymbs, 2011; Zwick and Dholakia, 2004; Wind and Mahajan, 2001). Raker, however, laments that “the power of digital was potentially a poisoned chalice, a Holy Grail, a lethal weapon of mass marketing destruction if wielded in the wrong hands.” Frown concurs, recalling the significance of his empirical examinations, ruminations and capitulations within a multitude of marketing organisations throughout the past 50-years as a never-ending supply chain of managers grappled with the concepts, strategies, plannings, implementations and controls of the marketing endeavour. For a long time, he argues, “textbooks have been criticised as being out-of-date and out-of-touch with contemporary thinking” (Gummesson, 2009), going so far as to agree that in many instances “they represented a flawed view of the practitioner world” (Ardley, 2008; Baron et al., 2011, p. 294). “Yes, indeed”, Raker continues, “the power of digital is truly significant in these challenging economic and political times but the reality remains that whilst academe has so much to provide it also has so much to learn.” For example, he asserts, “many practitioners fail to recognise the significance of Wedel and Kamakura’s (2000, p.329) critical observation that every [a, b, c, d and e-data-enriched profiling] model is at best an approximation of reality. And they’re right; we cannot and must not be blind to the fact that customer segments are not homogeneous groupings naturally occurring in the marketplace. They are determined by the manager’s strategic view of the market.” “Absolutely”, Frown adds, “and, if you pardon my intentional poetic pun, they might well be riding that digitally enhanced tidal wave of opportunity but the real danger here is that they very quickly find themselves not waving, but drowning!” The academic audience look shaken, possibly even stirred. They sit in silence; always a worrying sign.

Raker softens the mood: “However, we’re not saying that our discipline’s in crisis, far from it”, he suggests, “let us just for one moment embrace the theme of this conference, a theme that Bev Hulbert and his colleagues envisaged would consider the undoubtedly disruptive role that technology is having on marketing, in an effort to bring theory closer to practice” (Academy of Marketing, 2012). Frown steps in again: “Absolutely, our challenge is, as they state, to catch up and to ensure that technology is only ever an enabler of underlying marketing principles, not the driver of marketing actions.” The audience look hopeful.

“Yes, it’s probably pertinent to reflect here”, Raker adds, “but I was talking to Patrick Willows, a Senior Business Consultant at Inferion plc. the other day and he was telling me how they were really struggling to get through to one of their clients again. Basically, they’re in a fantastic position to capitalise on the digital revolution and the opportunities available and Patrick was saying that they were really working to harness the latest customer analytics, and, yes, I suppose in that sense they probably are riding this opportune wave of insight and co-creative possibility. I asked him what he meant and he explained that they could get closer to the customer than ever before, in any imaginable or ethically conceivable dimension. He gave me examples of the kinds of insight they were working with and I was shocked, I thought to myself, this is incredible, it’s all humming along the lines of a Big Brother revolution as they probe our daily lives to within a measurable nanosphere of our temporal awareness.” Raker pauses for a contemplative moment, takes a sip of his water, and makes a quick note to check with his old friend Des Morris to find out what ‘measurable nanosphere of temporal awareness’ actually means; he was sure he’d read about such world-leading ideas in a recent Org. Studies paper.

At this point in their tightly monitored, perfectly paced 15-minute delivery, Raker turns to PowerPoint. He explains that many practitioners are worried. They’d seen the digital tsunami coming years ago but they hadn’t really moved beyond the conceptual basics and herein lay the problem – how could they
and how should they? In conversation with Patrick it had become apparent to Raker that the scholars were onto something when they’d picked up on managerial implementation concerns in the 1990s (Dibb and Simkin, 1994; Dibb and Stern, 1995; Piercy and Morgan, 1993; Wensley, 1995) and the problems hadn’t gone away, they had simply magnified. “They’ve got the data alright,” argues Raker, “there’s certainly no problem there but they’re wondering what to do with it, how can they make it meaningful?” Patrick had expressed concerns with the multiple possibilities, the fragmented possibilities, and the seemingly endless possibilities. Yet, at the same time it was the certainties that had disappeared. They were calling out for a guiding framework and a conceptual basis for action. Which variables should they select, which analytical techniques should they implement, which aspects of the decision-making were intuitive or, worse still, which were arbitrary, and what could they tell their clients who’d jumped onto the digital wave themselves in order to create their own, usually conflicting, visions of the marketplace? And then looking to the Academy, moreover, how could new blood replace the old guard without sacrificing those hard learnt lessons of marketing acalme? Was it more than a coincidence that the organization scholars and their alternative modes of inquiry basked in 4* Research Excellence glory while their erstwhile marketing colleagues staunchly defended an allegiance to some kind of positivistic methodological convention (Baker, 2010), arguably to the detriment of the field? (Bartunek and Rynes, 2010; Lilien, 2011; Reibstein et al., 2009).

Frown frowns, he doesn’t want to use PowerPoint but there is no other way. There are no chalkboards, no OHP, no flipcharts, no whiteboards, he certainly doesn’t have an iPad and he is mindful of upsetting the paperless office brigade again by dishing out hard copies. He flashes his Venn diagram up onto the huge glowing screen and moves on to explain: “Our methodological approach, its empirical synthesis, its narrative presentation and its consideration of the resultant implications serves to facilitate and inform the interests of scholarly commentators, marketing undergraduates, teaching teams and practitioner debates to directly reflect upon contemporary arguments geared towards challenging, promoting and reconnecting marketing education with marketing practice” (see: Araujo et al., 2010; Harrigan and Hulbert, 2011). The audience respond with a huge sigh of relief.

And there it glowed, displayed for all to see at the front of the seminar room: a guiding framework, a clash of worldviews, a triadic clash of parallel narratives nonetheless, a conceptual prospect and a glimmer of methodological hope in a worrying climate of uncertainty. Frown makes his concluding points very clear: “First, managerially speaking, the power of digital can only be harnessed through a detailed understanding of managerial actions, decisions, foibles and frailties. We need to reconnect to the multifaceted, multidimensional social-scientific processes which enable us as scholars to facilitate and contemplate the underpinning rationales, the guiding principles, the critical oversights and the never-ending possibilities that the disciplinary scope of our multidisciplinary domain presents and ponders. Second, pedagogically speaking, it’s not necessarily a 2:1 degree that industry values, it’s more likely to be a critical reflector, a novel escape artist, or an original thinker; perhaps someone who’s been exposed to the realities of marketing management practice despite the restraints of a classroom based learning environment. I suppose the least we can do here is to listen to the likes of Gray et al. (2002), Taylor (2003) and Reisz (2010) as we attempt to make the marketing discourse more accessible to these stakeholders. Finally, methodologically speaking, we join those organization scholars to argue that storytelling has a lot to offer.” The audience begin to depart, reflecting pragmatically and paradigmatically on Frown’s final, PowerPointedly poignant words as the session is concluded to suggest why methodological plurality in the fusing of multiple marketing-related worldviews serves to challenge the norms of convention and presents an outcome that has so much to offer the domain. Indeed, “although each world[view] is necessary ... none is sufficient by itself; sufficiency comes from their integration” (Berthon et al., 2011, p. 183).
References


