Tales of Invisible Cities: Methodological Avenues For Multi-Sited Researcher Autoethnography

Yuko Minowa, Long Island University - Brooklyn Campus, USA
Pauline Maclaran, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK
Luca Visconti, Universita Bocconi, Italy

The present study discusses “xenoheteroglossic autoethnography” as a preliminary research method for multi-sited ethnography in consumer behavior. It is ethnographically-driven introspection by researchers from multiple countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. As a method, it is more intuitive, sensitizing, sense-making, and less expensive than traditional ethnography, and more inspiring and inquisitive than subjective personal introspection. As an illustrative example, three authors provide xenoheteroglossic autoethnography of their own consuming desires in the imagined, projected future city, illuminating the benefits, problems, and prospects. The study contributes to developing methodological canons for multi-sited autoethnography and to supplement the extant literature on ethnomethodology in consumer research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Multi-sited consumer research, in general, and multi-sited ethnography, in particular, have gained attention and popularity in the contemporary consumer research. Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (2003), for instance, conducted a phenomenological study on desire, based on the data collected in the USA, Turkey, and Denmark. Borghini, Visconti, Anderson, and Sherry (2008) studied street arts in urban cities in Italy, the UK, Ireland, and the USA. The multiplication of sites for data collection and interpretation requires collaborating researchers to pay special attention to cultural heterogeneity of their own, as much as their informants, throughout the course of ethnographic study.

While taking advantage of cultural dynamism, the differences may spawn problems at any stage of the study, and the trustworthiness of results may become questionable. According to Hall (1976, 37), “what gives man his identity no matter where he is born—is his culture, the total communication framework.” In the communication system, meanings can be read correctly only if one is familiar with the behavior in its historical, social, and cultural context. In this regard, although a researcher’s apprehension of his/her own culture, and those of collaborators, is the key for a successful collaborative ethnographic work, there is a paucity of methodological study to address this issue.

This paper aims to propose a new research method, “xenoheteroglossic autoethnography,” as a preliminary step to full-scale multi-sited ethnographic study. Combining the Greek word xenos, or foreigner, and Bakhtin’s first definition of heteroglossia (1934/1981), the term signifies an ethnographically-driven researchers’ introspection (autoethnography) generating, within a given account, a multiplicity of voices attributable to the various national and cultural ties of the researchers (xenoheteroglossic).

The choice of focusing our introspection on an ethnographic inquiry of the cities we inhabit has a twofold explanation. First for methodological reasons connected to the aim of the paper, we were looking for a topic that could emphasize the preeminence of the researcher’s cultural background, and assumed the way we live our cities largely reflect our idiosyncratic cultural bonds. The second motivation is conceptual. As researchers, we are used to interrogating consumers and companies, and even the market cultures in which their interactions take place. Still, we often avoid interpreting the city context in which such market exchanges and consumption experiences bloom.

We first review literature on introspection in consumer research followed by discussion on autoethnography in social science. Then, we discuss our proposed methodology in terms of making cultural rapport within and beyond the self; gathering and documenting data; analyzing and communicating data; and ensuring trustworthiness.

1. Making Cultural Rapport Within and Beyond the Self

There are two layers of cultural rapport the researcher needs to make: with the self and with collaborators. Initially, the researcher is the sole introspector and examines him/herself as informant. Being exposed to globalizing media and cultural and social influx, the researcher may be multivalent in value system and ambivalent in his/her cultural identity. Thus, prior to examining cultures external to the self, the very first step is the analysis of the self. On the other hand, learning about the collaborator’s cultural background and sharing the information about self examination about cultural polyvalence and ambivalence, which both affect the later polyphonic conversations, seem indispensable as the first stage of xenoheteroglossic autoethnographic study.

2. Gathering and Documenting Data

After research questions are selected, calibrated, and honed, autoethnographic researchers generate either or both generalized and/or particularistic data. Further, the data may be a direct “quotation” of the researcher’s inner feelings and thoughts without intentional articulation, or the data may be the researcher’s inscription about what he or she observes about the self as the subject of the study. An important procedural guideline while documenting the data is to make sense of cultural and social phenomena and their relation to ourselves by comparing, contrasting, replicating, and classifying the data. This leads to the necessity of constantly contrasting newly emerging interpretations amongst ourselves. This rigorous hermeneutic triad, cyclical process of explicating, explaining and exploring data, may be used in drawing inferences about patterns of co-occurrence, covariation, or mutual shaping (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993), all useful in developing theory in the later stage in multi-sited ethnographic study.

3. Analyzing and Communicating Data

In the xenoheteroglossic autoethnography, analyzing and communicating the result of the introspection is challenging. The difficulties arise as a result of differences in language and their uses in the cultural context. With respect to culture, Hall states (1976, 49), “the paradox of culture is that language, the system most frequently used to describe culture, is by nature poorly adapted to this difficult task.” When researchers from high-context cultures and low-context cultures work together, an additional caution should be noted. The implications of these differences is that in analyzing and communicating the autoethnographic data, these researchers must be extremely sensitive to the concealed or unspoken, covert feelings of other collaborators. Another different was the style of documentation. An autoethnographer may use an essay format while his/her colleagues may use poems and an excerpt from a fiction. Since the ultimate purpose of reportage is communication, taciturn self-reliance and self-complacency should be consciously noted by the self and to the others, and colleagues should feel free to request clarification in the communication process.

4. Ensuring Trustworthy Xenoheteroglossic Autoethnography

Trustworthiness for interpreting the result of autoethnographic study is not easily measurable. Based on the evaluative criteria for ethnographic study and introspection discussed previously (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993), in xenoheteroglossic autoethnography, we consider our cycle of continuous introspecting and ongoing analysis of the results as the primary component in generating trustworthy results. The iteration should be continued until saturation is felt to have
been achieved. During the procedural cycle, autoethnographers should discuss the result of introspection, then polarize particular aspects that had been absent in the previous result of the introspection. While iterating this cyclical procedure, the researchers become more sensitized to the cultural nuances. This ensures the trustworthiness in xenoheteroglossic autoethnography, and also contributes to fostering cultural sensitivity that would be integrated into full-blown multi-sited ethnographic study.

REFERENCES
Hall, Edward (1976), Beyond Culture, Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.