

“Rolled Up in a Ball”: Towards a Poetics of Consumption

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The hedgehog is the animal that can teach us the most about consumption. French poststructuralist Jacques Derrida (1995) compares the act of writing a poem to a hedgehog thrown onto the highway, “absolute, solitary, rolled up in a ball” (p. 289), exposing itself to death and at the same time protecting itself. In other words, poetry is “this thing which in the same stroke exposes itself to death and protects itself” (p. 293). Derrida’s poor hedgehogs can teach us a thing or two about consumption...

Consumer culture theorists have tried their hand at writing poems, which the regular poetry session feature of the CCT Conference serves as clear evidence of—not to mention most of the content in the rebranded *Journal of Customer Behaviour*. Even the Consumer Odyssey of the mid-80s is named after Homer’s epic poem (Belk 1987). As Brown (2014) points out, “poetry’s too important to us to be left alone” (p. 5).

Poetry has had a role in consumer research since Sherry and Schouten (2002) used their own experiences as ‘researcher-poets’ to illustrate how the writing and close reading of poetry can take us directly to the heart of consumption. This research stream tends to perceive the *researcher* as a poet (Bhagal-Nair 2023; Rojas-Gaviria and Canniford 2022; Tonner 2019; Wijland 2011). From a methodological perspective, Canniford (2012) argues that poetry reveals the researcher, creates territory for new knowledge, and challenges theoretical paradigms. Yet, remarkably little is known about the poetising of *consumers*.

The aim of this paper is to delineate some of the ways in which individuals draw on poetry to imbue their consumption activities with beauty and other aesthetic qualities. We focus on the poetising among consumers as a form of meaning-making that provides aesthetic, emotional, existential, or therapeutic value (Downey 2016). In short, we regard consumers as poets, and, to that end, we turn to literary theory to interpret their behaviour (Eagleton 2011).

The topic of this paper fits well into the Waughian conference theme, *Utopia Revisited*, as a poem does not have to conform to the universal patterns to which events conform in the real world, but how we think it ought to be. In Sartre’s (2012) words, “poetic acts [are] the systematic pursuit of the impossible” (p. 13). For the ancient Greeks, poetry was a source

of both intense pleasure and bewitching enchantment (Aristotle 1996).

On that note, Barbara B. Stern (in Carlson, Grove, and Stafford 2005) mentions that while advertising has been described as the poetising of consumer goods, questions remain as to what is meant by a poem in advertising text. “The apparatus of literary criticism,” Brown (1998) points out, “has yet to be extensively applied outside the advertising arena” (p. 25). Extending Stern’s (1989) textual approach from the advertising domain to consumer culture, we thus ask how consumers enact poetic elements in their identity work. *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, Derrida’s (2016, p. 172) famous statement that nothing exists outside text, seems to support our assumption that consumer behaviour can be interpreted using literary methods.

First and foremost, the poet is a maker of plots, and, as noted by Aristotle (1996, p. 14), “well-constructed plots should [...] not begin or end at any arbitrary point.” By restructuring events so they have a beginning, a middle, and an end, consumers can imbue their plots with a sense of wholeness, thus increasing the magnitude of a consumption experience.

Moreover, plots ought to be constructed dramatically and contain events that arouse grand feelings. A poet’s job is not to relate what has happened but what may happen. When dramatising, consumers can thus focus on the fictive or things that ought to happen. One way for consumers to invoke drama is to point out some grave error or injustice that has been done to them or someone they know.

Character, one’s moral fortitude and disposition, is central to the poetics of consumption. Traits of character can be represented through consumer actions that are thought to reflect one’s disposition. In other words, actions possess character if they disclose the nature of a deliberate choice. As a poetic device, characterisation can provide the consumer with a feeling of consistency. Consumers invoke character to bring protagonists to life. These protagonists drive the plot forward. It is how characters respond to the various events that defines what will happen in the story.

Lastly, catharsis, defined by Aristotle as ‘purification’ where the subject derives pleasure from the experience of pain, denotes the positive social function of tragedy. Through catharsis, poetics creates a space for consumers where they can explore

and experience negative emotions in order to purge themselves from them. One way for consumers to derive cathartic value is to empathise with different characters in the plot.

While it is clear how advertisers could benefit from poetry as it would make advertising text more memorable (Dagalp and Södergren 2023), we believe there is also a poetic rhythm in terms of how consumers go about in their everyday lives. Poetry appears when the consumer feels like “an animal thrown onto the road” (Derrida 1995, p. 289). In other words, poetry could help us as consumer researchers better understand those complex and ambiguous feelings that dictate many customer experiences.

Derrida (2008) revisits his hedgehog ten years later, admitting that his inspiration came from a reading of Lewis Carroll. More precisely, he remembers the Queen’s croquet ground in *Alice in Wonderland* where the balls were live hedgehogs, concluding that “thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry” (p. 7).

Our study contributes to the stream of consumer research informed by literary theory by illuminating poetic aspects of consumption, thus serving as a counterpoint to previous studies where the researcher is seen as a poet (cf. Sherry and Schouten 2002). Poetry allows consumers to take the futility of society and fill it with grandeur. This paper offers a novel, yet highly restricted view on consumer poetising.

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