

# How useful a diary can be? An investigation into alcohol consumption

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## Research context

- So far very few studies have been carried out using qualitative diaries as the main method of investigation.
- Some authors argue that diaries could add previously unexplored dimensions to consumer research (Arnould, 1998).
- Alcohol consumption as an multifacet and involving consumers' behaviour.
- This paper discusses the use of diary method in the ongoing multi-method research project investigating the role of alcohol consumption in university students' lives in Canada and Poland.



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## Literature review

- One of the first uses of diaries in psychological research can be found in Allport (1942).
- Patterson (1995) define diary as a personal record of daily events, observations and thoughts, which at the same time identified the contexts in which they occur. His experience confirmed that this method 'is particularly suited to exploring processes, relationships, settings, products, and consumers' (*ibid.*).
- The primary objective is to capture 'little experiences of everyday life that fill most of our working time and occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention' (Wheeler and Reis 1991).



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## Literature review

- An important advantage of diary research is its ability to reveal experiences and thoughts which are often hidden.
- In diaries, recorded events are captured in their natural environment. Diaries 'offer the opportunity to investigate social, psychological, and physiological processes, within everyday situations' (Bolger *et al.*, 2003) .
- Diaries overcoming the problem of selective memory (Wren 1991).
- Diaries also show much higher precision than retrospective interviews when minor but repetitive events, which are only separate fragments of informants' overall consumption patterns, are studied (Palojoki and Tuomi-Gröhn 2001).



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## Literature review

- Students' alcohol consumption represents an ideal situation for employing the diary method because the use of diaries encourages informants to keep a record of anything that may be relevant to the study (Elliott 1997).
- That record of activities and thoughts which occurred in their natural environment, uninfluenced by the presence of an observer, can then be discussed during a focus group or interview to yield further insights into the phenomenon under study.
- This kind of 'two-stage' research design was used for example by Palojoki and Tuomi-Gröhn (2001), who investigated the complexity of food choices in an everyday household context using qualitative food diaries followed by retrospective, semi-structured interviews based on them



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## Research method

- First, five single-sex focus groups involving 36 participants were conducted, two in Poland (4 males and 6 females) and three in Canada (8 males, 11 females and 7 females).
- Respondents: college students; 20 – 24 years old.
- After each focus group the informants were asked to keep individual written diaries for the period of two weeks. They were instructed to keep a daily record of every occurrence that was, in their opinion, related to alcohol consumption.
- The diaries were anonymous.
- After finishing writing diaries repeated two focus groups in Poland.



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## Diaries as a research method

- anonymity: personal and intimate issues especially amongst women:

*I was surprised when I realised what I was writing about in my diary, I was really honest and wrote about everything exactly as it looked like. I mean, talking about my emotions and thoughts is quite complicated and difficult thing*

- that honesty found in diaries appears to play a crucial role in the process of exploring the role of alcohol in individual and social identities of our respondents
- identification of new research problems (e.g. influence of religion on alcohol consumption)
- reflexivity of respondents:

*I'm really sad when I think that he showed some interest in me only at the end of the evening, and that we only get close when he already had a few drinks... and at the end I feel guilty about that anyway*



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## Diaries v. focus groups

- the data found in diaries appear to be much more detailed and precise in terms of amount and frequency of alcohol consumption
- difference between perceived and actual amount of alcohol consumed; respondents realised themselves there was a significant difference between what they thought they consumed and what they actually consumed
- the process of writing diary lead to reflection on respondents own behaviour and opinions:

*After writing my diary for a couple of days I looked at everything I wrote earlier and thought: wow, too much, you need to slow down!*

- public declaration of limiting alcohol consumption:

*I think I realised that I can relax, have fun with my friends and still with beer, but maybe alcohol-free beer, that's what changed in my consumption. Now if I drink I usually have alcohol-free beer, I mean, I drink beer with alcohol as well, but it's more fifty-fifty now*



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## Dairies v. respondents

- more detailed observation of reality:

*I think I started paying more attention to how people behave after alcohol, I don't think I used to observe them that much... how people react, how everybody reacts to alcohol in their unique individual way.*

- sensitisation to negative consequences of alcohol consumption:

*I started noticing things like when somebody is being dragged out of a club because they fell asleep on a table or things like that*

- perception of the negative impact of alcohol not only on those drinking, but also its delayed effect on others when consumed in excess



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## Conclusions

- focus groups provided interesting insights into social aspects of alcohol consumption, dairies offered rich material exploring the phenomena at much more personal, often intimate level
- dairies significantly increased reflexivity of our respondents, encouraging them to think about the subject of this research in more organised and rigorous way; dairies make better observers with respondents
- passive informants v. active researchers
- the diary method is best utilised when combined with other research tools and techniques
- it is required high level of respondents engagement
- the insights gained in this study could be used to generate further research
- in terms of implications for market research, it became clear that by asking potential respondents to keep dairies for one or two weeks before the main data collection should result in much more interesting and relevant insights



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