**On Critical Collaborative Videographies**

**Andreas Chatzidakis** Royal Holloway University of London Andreas.Chatzidakis@rhul.ac.uk

**& Pauline Maclaran** Royal Holloway University of London

Pauline.Maclaran@rhul.ac.uk

**Abstract**

In Spring 2015, we produced a collaborative videography about Skoros, an anti-consumerist collective in Athens, Greece. We and the members of the collective jointly negotiated the end product, by discussing the script and editorial decisions about the content. The filming of the project, artistic direction, music supervision and graphics design were almost entirely done by the members of the collective. In this short commentary we position our approach against the use of collaborative ethnographic techniques in consumer research and social sciences more broadly. We reflect upon the difficulties that we encountered and conclude by discussing the broader implications for filmic marketing and consumer research.

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/154760339>

Password: Skoros

**Introduction**

During Spring 2015, we (co)produced a collaborative ethnographic film about Skoros, an anti-consumerist collective in Exarcheia, Athens that was established just before the Greek crisis. It is a space where people can come and give, take, or give and take goods and exchange services without any norms of reciprocity. Originally conceived as a response to an increasingly commercialized and consumerist (Athenian) society, Skoros counter-proposed the values of sharing, re-using, gifting, solidarity and a collective commitment to doing things differently. Soon after Skoros’s opening, however, came the biggest ever contraction recorded by a Western economy during peacetime. Inevitably, Skoros faced an existential crisis, not least because conventional critiques of consumers and consumerism became somewhat redundant. As the film narrates, Skoros faced a number of problems, overall questioning whether its original ideas were still effectively put to the test of everyday praxis.

Our approach to producing ‘Skoros: Anti-Consumption in Crisis’ was collaborative. That is, members of the Skoros took part in every step of the film-making process, from discussing the script to conducting academic research and making editorial decisions about the content. Such collaborative videographic research techniques represent a mid-way between the etic-like distance of an observational videography and the intense emic-like closeness of an autovideography (Kozinets and Belk, 2006). Although they have been used successfully in various anthropological films and more recently, in the broader management and organisational studies literature (Jarett and Liu, 2016; Slutskaya, Game and Simpson, 2016; Toraldo, Islam and Mangia; 2016; Whiting et al. 2016), they have yet to be fully explored within consumer research. Our aim, therefore, is to integrate collaborative videographies into the significant body of videographic consumer research by first, highlighting similarities and differences to extant studies and second, illustrating a methodological pathway for future research.

**Collaborative Ethnographies and Videographic Consumer Research**

For Lassiter (1998, 2005), collaborative ethnography refers to explicit cooperation between researcher and research participants. He traces its origins to the postmodern crisis of representation that questioned power relations in the ethnogrphic research process and acknowledged many imbalances due to the gendered, classed or racialised identity of the researcher, as well as their informants. Accordingly, collaborative approaches draw upon reciprocal, self-reflexive and dialogical perspectives to build a more deliberate and explicit collaborative paradigm, one “that seeks to more honestly grapple not only with the divisions between Self and Other, between object and subject, and between academic and community-based knowledge but also with the complexity of representing human experience in an ever-changing postcolonial and postindustrial world” (Lassiter, 2005, p.48). Repositioning informants as ‘consultants’ is important to right the potential power imbalance in the research relationship and, in doing so, collaborative ethnography:

...yields texts that are co-conceived or cowritten, with local communities of collaborators and consider multiple audiences outside the confines of academic discourses, including local constituencies...is both a theoretical and methodological approach for doing and writing ethnography...[which] implies constant mutual engagement at every step of the process (Ibid, pp. 16-17).

Thus, collaborative ethnography co-produces insider knowledge about a community through researcher-consultant cooperation that involves all parties throughout the research process, but especially at the writing stage (Clerke and Hopwood, 2014). As Bhattacharya (2008, p.308) observes, collaborative research “is “with” people rather than “on” or “about” people”. The intended outcome of this approach is to tell a story about the research community through ongoing negotiation and dialogue around the many subjective interpretations of events and situations. Importantly, collaborative ethnography aims to be polyphonic and to avoid foregrounding particular voices at the expense of silencing others. Fundamentally, it problematises the dualities of researcher and researched by embracing what Whiting et al. (2016) label as the paradox of observational research; that is, working with what the participants do when they are conscious of being observed as opposed to viewing observation as an (inescapable) form of data “contamination”.

Collaborative ethnography can be distinguished from what Clerke and Hopwood (2014) refer to as ‘team ethnograhy’ which also challenges academic individualism by seeking to overcome biases in the research process. Team ethnography often uses multidisciplinary (or mixed background i.e. age, gender, ethnicity and so forth) teams of researchers as well as multi-sited ethnographies. Here, however, the collaboration emphasis is inter-team, as opposed to researcher-participant based. The distinction between the two can sometimes be a little blurred. For example, Belk’s (2000), research on the consumption patterns of the new elite in Zimbabwe, conducted with executive MBA students in Africa University, is described as collaborative, yet on further interrogation appears to meet more fully the criteria for a team ethnography. Although the executive MBA students in Belk’s study were themselves a part of the group being studied, this was primarily to gain access and trust in order to conduct the research process (interviewing and observing carried out by them) and could be alternatively described as “participatory ethnography” (Slutskaya et al. 2016). There was little negotiation of the process in conjunction with participants, an important characteristic of collaborative ethnography. Indeed, one of the dangers highlighted in the Zimbabwe project was a tendency towards self-presentation on the part of the MBA students, as opposed to ensuring multi-vocality with informants.

An essential element ofcollaborative videography is that researchers and informants jointly negotiate the end product with both being involved in the filming of the project, and both making editorial decisions about the final content of the videography. Furthermore, our videography takes both an explicit and a critical collaborative approach. According to Madison (2005), the latter implies not only polyvocality, but also commitment to making some kind of difference in the participants’ world. Videography provides a focal point through which to involve participants, and especially in an editorial process that can provoke further reflection and dialogue. What we term “critical collaborative videography”, emphasizes praxis and is politically motivated, seeking to bring about social change and working with community-based organisations and non-academic institutions (i.e. Bhattacharya, 2008; Thomas, 1992). Critical collaborative videography is particularly appropriate to challenge dominant social structures at the intersection of class, race, age, disability and gender. A crucial difference from traditional videography/ethnography is that in critical collaborative videography, culture is being co-performed, as opposed to being something out there that is to be discovered by an expert researcher (Bhattacharya, 2008). Of course we recognise that non-collaborative videographies can also serve similar critical aims (for examples, see Varman and Vikas, 2007; Vikas and Varman, 2007; Bengtsonn, Ostberg and Kjeldgaard, 2005). Nonetheless, we argue that criticality and dialogical reflexivity are often ingrained in collaborative methods, given the inherent assurances of polyvocality and collective decision-making.

Ontologically, critical collaborative videographies are closer to what Hietanen, Rokkas and Schouten (2014) describe as expressive rather than representational videography. That is, they assume there is no such thing as an “authentic” or “neutral” representation of the researcher’s community and that the production of any videography is fraught with power imbalances and unresolved contradictions. Consequently, collaboration is not employed as a strategy for achieving more transparent and genuine representations of the participants’ world(s) (cf Schembri and Boyle, 2013). Rather, as noted below, participants become consultants throughout the research process. The expressive power that the videographic product wields is negotiated and re-distributed between the members of the research team. In the process, this also allows them to access what Toraldo et al. (2016) term *elusive knowledges,* i.e. more tacit, aesthetic and embodied. The overall aim is to tell verbal and non-verbal stories that are inter-subjectively experienced and which serve common and/or complementary agendas.

**Our approach to Collaboration**

As noted in the introduction, there is not a single approach to collaborative videographic methods. The level of collaboration can vary significantly depending on the context and purpose of the project undertaken (Bhattacharya, 2008). Collaboration, for instance, can only take place at the fieldwork stage (Schembri, 2009; Schembri and Boyle, 2013) or throughout the project, from its original inception to analysing the data and writing-up or film editing. Increasingly however, collaboration tends to be fully-fledged, treating informants not only as useful collaborators for particular parts of the research but as “consultants about culture and meaning” (Lassiter, 2005, p.8). Accordingly, explicit collaborative techniques are underpinned by key principles, such as focus on the researcher’s moral and political responsibility, ethnographic honesty, accessible writing, collaborative reading, writing and co-interpreting (Ibid). In keeping with Lassiter’s recommendations, we detail how our researcher-consultant relationship impacted on the research and writing process from start to finish.

*Inception:*The film was proposed during a meeting between five members of Skoros and the first author. The rationale was to find a way of narrating the story and legacy of Skoros, both to current and/or future members and the broader community. Together with our informants we formed a working group comprising eight members after approval of the film during a Skoros assembly (biweekly meetings between all members). All members were given the option to participate in the filmmaking process and we were clear in our aim to involve as many members as possible. Our underlying aim was to achieve polyphony and polyvocality (Erickson and Stull, 1998); a final product that reflected members’ own understandings and representations of Skoros.

*Research:* All the filmed interviews were undertaken by the first author although a member of Skoros team, with appropriate experience, also took some preliminary (non-filmed) interviews. Interviews lasted between 46-93minutes and the vast majority of them were conducted in Skoros’s premises with the exception of five, that took place in nearby areas. Two more members assisted with transcribing the data and discussing the emerging themes on an iterative basis.

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*Script Development and Iterations:* The original script was developed by ourselves and then discussed extensively during a Skoros assembly. This script was based on ongoing ethnographic research that was conducted by ourselves since Skoros’s establishment. This proved to be an ideal arrangement because it gave us an opportunity to access further “voices” and “stories” about Skoros and develop a script that was carefully thought out (Heider, 2006). Subsequent iterations were made on the basis of the newly acquired data (filmed interviews), discussions with the working group and adhoc conversations with other members of the collective during daily shifts and bi-weekly assemblies .

*Filming and Production:* Members of the working group were present throughout filming. The team comprised a producer, a graphics designer, a sound operator (external member), a director, a music supervisor, a research assistant, and an editor (external member). Where appropriate, members of the team made independent artistic judgments (upon consultation), for example in relation to music and graphics. This was in line with Mead’s (1970) notion that successful ethnographic teams take advantage of members’ complementary and non-competitive skills with a view to arrive at a final product that is ‘co-owned’ by all.

*Discussing and Disseminating the End Product:*Multiple iterations of the end product were undertaken and discussed between the members of the working group, allowing us to engage in what Jarett and Liu (2016) describe as "zooming with" the research participants. The final editorial decisions were negotiated between ourselves, the director, and the editor. Stylistically, we avoided using any voice-over narration and opted instead for letting our participants tell their own stories in their own words (Slutskaya et al. 2016). The completed film was also presented at a Skoros assembly. Subsequently it was disemminated more widely, including academic audiences (by ourselves) and broader communities (for example the film was shown at a solidarity economies festival and at a documentary festival). A year later, the film was also picked up by the National Greek Broadcaster (ERT3) and aired over five different time slots. That not only generated a lot of positive publicity about Skoros but also inspired similar initiatives in a couple of other Athenian neighborhoods.

**Towards Critical Collaborative Videographies**

The most distinguishing feature of collaborative videographies is that the ethnographic research is done “with” rather that “for”, “on” or “about” people. Thus in critically oriented videographies the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants is put centre-stage and subjected to scrutiny. In our videography, for instance, this resulted in ongoing discussions about our positionality and cultural situatedness, including our own reasons for co-producing the film and the ways in which we were going to use it, from presenting it at academic conferences and writing papers to assisting the Skoros collective in disseminating the film in alternative media outlets. Accordingly, the (main) political purpose of the film was made explicit from the beginning and guided our decisions throughout the filmmaking process. Specifically, this was to provide a powerful and inspiring narration of the history and the ideas of Skoros at a time when the collective was undergoing a severe existential crisis (including failing to attract new members), due to the numerous problems encountered because of (and beyond) the economic crisis.

For Bhatacharrya (2008), the emphasis on political purpose is a key feature of collaborative projects, distinguishing them from the rather more simplistic understanding of collaboration in earlier ethnographies. Traditional preoccupations with objectivity and validity are replaced with thorough discussions of situatedness and the performance of culture and experience. That is to say, reflections on our presence and the presence of those researched – and how both are shaped by a variety of biographical, linguistic, socio-economic, political, symbolic and material dimensions (Clarke, 2005). Therefore, the “critical” in new collaborative ethnographies does not only have to do with thinking through the lens of critical theory but – more importantly – with “doing” and “performing” it: “critical ethnography is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue towards substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other’s world” (Madison, 2005, p.15). Hence, new critical collaborative videographies commonly include more than a single researcher, multiple nonacademic settings and a decidedly political ethos that focuses on affecting social change processes (Bhattacharya, 2008).

In practice, critical collaborative ethnographies often bear resemblance to action or community-based research (particularly in health and education settings; e.g. Parrott and Steiner, 2003) and they are also akin to methods of “sociological intervention” (Touraine, 1978; Dubet and Wieviork, 1996). In the case of Skoros, the critical collaborative videography enabled members to by-pass traditional, politically partisan media sources and publicise their anti-consumption values and sharing ethos that challenge the existing consumerist paradigm. The video reached out to both new members of the collective and inspired similar initiatives to nearby neighbourhoods.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Collaborative Filmic Research**

Critical collaborative videographies represent a particularly appealing method for (consumer) researchers that study subcultures, social movements and various related questions of power, privilege and hegemonic structures. However they are not without limitations. To begin with, they take a considerable amount of time to complete, not least because of the need to discuss and collectively scrutinise every stage in the film-making process (Slutskaya et al. 2016). Relatedly, establishing trust and negotiating entry can prove far more challenging because for the researcher, the task at hand becomes one of proposing a collaborative project that will represent everybody’s voice. This may make both researchers and participants anxious about their role in the process. Finally, unlike traditional videographies, collaborative videographies foreground rather than obfuscate the power imbalances between the researcher(s) and their collaborators. Equal credence is given to both, resulting in ‘multi-voice’ projects that do not privilege any particular positions or claims to knowledge (Lassiter, 2005; Slutskaya et al. 2016). Although this may work well in practice, there may be circumstances (e.g. when working with vulnerable populations) where there is a clear justification for giving additional credence to the researcher, for instance, because of their knowlegde or their training in method and analysis (Bachattarya, 2008). Ultimately, it is down to the researcher(s) to decide whether their videography is one that could be done in a more critical and collaborative fashion. From our experience, however, we would argue that there are plentiful examples of studies that enthusiastically engage with critical theory and yet remain rather silent on more critically-oriented methods (see e.g Bradshaw and Firat, 2012). We would also add that being open and identifying a common political purpose can go a long way in terms of resolving and pre-empting many difficulties and contradictions that may otherwise arise when engaging in collaborative work.

Another potential limitation of critical collaborative videographies is that claims to knowledge and theoretical contribution(s) are likely to run counter to existing institutional conventions of writing/filming and disseminating academic work. In other words, collaborative ethnographies are about giving equal credence to the researcher(s) and their collaborators. This may prove problematic for researchers that are interested in publishing their work in career-friendly outlets. For example, some feedback we got from our film was that it was very well-executed but somewhat atheoretical. We would argue that this is because of a basic misunderstanding in terms of how theory is produced and communicated in collaborative ethnographies. Unlike traditional ethnographic research, the distance between the emic and the etic is significantly narrowed, with accessibility being a key underlying principle throughout the process (Lassiter, 2005). Every stage of the film-making process is yet another set of iterations and ongoing conversations between researchers and collaborators. Put differently, in collaborative ethnographies, the development of theory and knowledge is inherent in the process, not the prerogative of the lone researcher(s) that takes some kind of (privileged) distance from the phenomenon at hand. As we note above, the most distinguishing feature of collaborative videographies is that the development of any kind (emic-etic) of understanding is done “with” rather than “for” the participants.

This leads us into the final question, which is about how should one judge the quality of collaborative videographic work. On the one hand, collaborative videographies are likely to score higher in terms of the aesthetic and technical criteria that are currently applied to consumer videographies (Belk and Kozinets, 2007) as they may benefit from sharing a larger pool of skills with other people (who may have production skills, artistic skills and so on). However, as we note above, they may be undermined in terms of topicality and theoretical criteria given that the style of collaborative ethnographic theory development remains unconventional and clearly less understood within consumer research. In this respect, we hope that our commentary will inspire further work and appreciation of the potential of collaborative videographic techniques. Such potential is obvious in settings involving alternative consumer communities, subcultures and movements; especially those that wish to challenge broader socio-political structures or even more micro-level norms and rituals. Oftentimes members of such collectives are actively interested in expressing themselves rather than being represented; and willing to share ideas and complementary skills with researchers that have successfully negotiated access to their life worlds.

Before concluding, we would like to highlight another criterion that should be applied to collaborative projects, if not consumer videographies more broadly: that is “catalytic validity” (Lather, 2001; see also Bhattacharya, 2008) or the capacity of the project to transform the world and the experiences of those researched. Although claims to catalytic validity may not always be possible, depending on the scope and nature of each videography, we argue that collaborative videographies provide an answer as to how a more transformative stream of filmic marketing and consumer research may develop.

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