

Mapping craft and consumption in data work

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In this short position paper, I draw attention to an aspect of my forthcoming CHI 2022 paper [2]: the ‘dance’ between craft and consumption that is required for researchers to collect, analyses and report data. The paper itself largely focuses on consumption experiences, but here I return to thinking a little more about this tension and how it might be beneficial to map it in future work. If you’re reading this and this sounds like something that you’d be interested in collaborating on, [let me know!](#)

1 CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

I have had a paper accepted to the main conference this year, “Consumption experiences in the research process” [2]. The paper is about the experiential aspects of doing research, with a specific focus on consumption experiences, a concept that I have borrowed from marketing [3]. The thesis of the paper is that researchers at a consumers at different points in their research processes. When acting as consumers, researchers can be influenced by market mechanisms, such as marketing, but also their subjective experience of the consumption — it might make researcher-consumers feel good, or it may appeal to an aesthetic sensibility. These are consumption experiences, and in the paper I explore the implications of these experiences for our capacity to generate new insights through our work.

This paper contributes to a growing literature on the human aspects of data collection and analysis (e.g., [1, 4, 5]), specifically the experiential aspects of these processes.

2 CRAFT AND CONSUMPTION

One of the things I do in the paper is to place consumption experiences at points in the research process next to craft experiences at others. In the paper, I argue that most research benefits from including aspects of consumption. Without it, we’d be reinventing wheels; spending out time re-crafting research artefacts that already exist in a form better than we might be able to reproduce ourselves. To get research done, we need to move between these two modes, craft and consumption, in order to be able to produce new knowledge.

At the end of the paper, I set out a few empirical questions that I think it would be work pursuing in future work. One of these questions is: “*How do researchers dynamically navigate the trade-offs of craft and consumption in their research processes?*” [2, p. 12]. I’d like to explain a little more about why I think this question is an important one, and one that is worth pursuing.

What are the trade-offs between craft and consumption? With consumption, we get to stand on the shoulders of giants and save lots of time redoing things that others have done better. With craft, we get a level of reflexivity that consumption denies us, and this helps us ask the right kinds of questions at the right moments. In conducting research it’s necessary to make choices about whether to take a craft or consumption approach at different points in the process. How do researchers make these choices and why do they make them?

One of the ideas I advance in the paper is that the consumption experiences in the research process have hedonic, aesthetic and symbolic aspects to them. But that’s not to say that these are the only factors influencing these decisions about what choices to make, of course. There are other constraints; financial ones, staffing ones, logistical ones, scientific ones.

3 WHY BOTHER WITH A MAPPING?

I think it would be valuable to begin to map the ways that craft and consumption are applied by researchers in their processes because this knowledge could be used to produce probes for reflection. Initially, this mapping could be **descriptive**; a set of research projects where the research process is mapped and then annotated with craft and consumption. I think it would make sense for this mapping and annotation to be co-created by the researcher trying to do the mapping and by participants (i.e., other researchers), it's not always completely clear what is craft and what is consumption, so co-creation would allow for some negotiation over these constructs.

After conducting a descriptive mapping, it would be useful to then attempt an **explanatory** mapping. The goal of this mapping would be to not just understand how a given process looks, but to understand why it looks like it looks. Why have the researchers decided to consume at a certain point? Why have the decided to fully engage in a craft process? This would help us to understand the underpinning factors for why researchers are making their choices.

I suggest in the CHI paper that the loss of reflexivity that comes with consumption might limit researchers' capacity to ask the right research questions or to make serendipitous discoveries. I think that having a mapping would permit the development of tools that would help researchers to interrogate their choices. In doing so, they could be more selective and intentional with the research choices they make. Along the way, researchers might discover that they are being influenced by factors they had not considered. Perhaps seeing the influence of these factors they might change their research approach.

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