Using Script and textual analysis and close readings of media reports to analyse 'So-called Food-Fraud Scandals''

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Abstract

In the last four decades, the food industry in the United Kingdom has been subject to a considerable number of so-called "food-fraud scandals." In order to better understand how to investigate and theorise these 'scandal' incidents in context (comprising signals-modus operandi-multiple emergent narratives), the original research recognised and critiqued how scandal incidents were framed. Eight food related incidents were scrutinised using a case study approach from published, open access evidence. A framework of incidents was developed across the stages, within and of, the modus operandi, and also to visualise how the incident itself was framed by being termed a scandal. This methodological case study addresses some of the strengths, but also the constraints and practical challenges, of the methodological approach and the methods employed within the research. The advantages and disadvantages of iterative case study research are critiqued. This case study is of value to researchers undertaking iterative, interpretivist, pragmatic studies and to help them to understand the influence and potential bias associated with their positionality.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this case study, readers should be able to:

- Explain iterative research, the process that is followed and how data emerging from multiple sources can be synthesised effectively.

- Critique the use of script and textual analysis as a methodology and highlight its strengths and limitations.

- Apply their newfound confidence and knowledge in critiquing an original article and appreciating its nuances.

- Analyse their own research skills and determine whether iterative research is an approach that would be of value in their own work.

- Develop the confidence to use iterative research approaches appropriately and effectively.

Project Overview and Context

The genesis of the original research article upon which this case is based (see Smith, Manning & McElwee, 2022) began circa 2019, when two of the authors were engaged in a study into the so-called Horsemeat scandal (Smith & McElwee, 2019) and noticed that many of the media articles on the scandal [and food-fraud in general] appeared to be written to a formulaic script. They then wrote a further paper (Smith et al., 2019). which underpins this case. Food-fraud is a contemporary issue and rapidly expanding sub-literature of criminal entrepreneurship (Smith et al., 2019). Indeed, Food-fraud is a complex activity but is often regarded as food that is misrepresented or tainted for economic gain (Southey, 2019) when in fact the modus-operandi of people involved in disingenuous, even criminal behaviour has many other facets. It can and does involve organised criminal activity and insider crime (Smith et al., 2022). One challenge in undertaking research in this area is the multidisciplinary nature of the research enquiry and researching across disciplinary barriers. This is because Food-fraud as a topic encapsulates both the criminology literature and the alternative non-criminologically focused management, policy and food science literature. The concept of 'the Scandal' emerges from academic literature, broader mainstream media and social media e.g., the Horsemeat Scandal (see Smith & McElwee, 2021; Gottschalk & Benson, 2020); the Melamine scandal (Sharma & Paradakar, 2010). Using terms such as 'scandal' energises

policymakers' determination to 'do something about it' in order to protect consumers and the integrity of the food system (Lord et al., 2017a) argues that food-crime is a concern so must be promoted to a national and international priority policy focus (Lord et al., 2017b). However, terming an incident as a scandal, leads to a narrative unfolding that can then take on its own entropy potentially influencing or impinging on the ability to implement an appropriate investigation into the incident and the necessary remedial action.

One of the problematic issues of dealing with Food-fraud incidents is the complexity of the contributing factors associated with the incidents and the length of time it takes to investigate and prosecute them (De Oleo et al., 2022; Nayak et al., 2022). In some cases, the gestation period from offence to successful prosecution can be six years (Smith & McElwee, 2021). This has the effect of obscuring the data because until conviction, the facts remain sub-judice, and often anecdotal. This opacity undermines trust and confidence in individual businesses, and regulators and in consumer confidence in the integrity of the supply chain. When a Food-fraud incidence is regarded as a scandal it can be viewed by the public as being old news and therefore dismissed as being dated information.

Smith et al., (2022) note that the overuse of the term 'scandal' in Food-fraud incidents (and other forms of criminal and non-regulatory practices of the food industry) obfuscates the intrinsic elements of criminality, hindering investigation, and allocation of appropriate resources. In the 'Food-fraud scandals' considered by Smith et al., (2022) there is a focus on the alleged or actual criminal and commercial logic involved. The research question was -

"*How does the introduction of the term 'scandal' and its related scripts influence*

media accounts of Food-fraud?

To address this question, eight UK related incidents between the 1970s and 2018 were examined. The analysis provides a novel approach revealing the underlining script of the

'scandals' to then develop a theoretical framework of value to regulators and investigators, expand literature through a cross-disciplinary perspective that combines theory on food-crime, media, business and supply chains. Common factors in the anatomy of scandals are identified to inform required policy and legislative change. We examine the causes, nature and organisation of the incidents and discuss their effects whilst exposing common trends, patterns and features of such incidents that can be used to shape societal responses and also create a more efficient and effective criminal justice response.

Section Summary

- *Food-fraud is a complex issue that can be difficult to study.*

- *Labelling a Food-fraud incidence as a scandal can be counterproductive because it can obfuscate the serial and repetitive elements of such frauds which are often long-running and perpetuated by insider criminals and organised criminal enterprises.*

- *The intrinsic elements of an incident, which may be criminal in nature, can be difficult to document, understand and research.*

- *The use of script and textual analysis as a methodology can be of value in this context by allowing our understandings to develop using an accepted framework applicable across all so-called scandals.*

Research Design

The qualitative methodology employed in this study utilised 'script, narrative and textual analysis' (Reissman, 1993; Allen, 2017) and 'Close Readings' (Amernic & Craig, 2006; Love 2013) of media reports. Close reading is a particular form of textual analysis that is either a *"…method"* or *"…account resulting from the practice of that method. After engaging in the activity of reading closely, you can write down (or simply communicate) a "reading," an*

account of your findings. Closeness here describes a practice of reading that is strict, searching, and minute; it remains close or near to the text" (Schur, 1998). We drew upon the use of the 'Anatomy' structuration and mechanism to unpick common outlines and scripts to develop a theoretical contextualisation (as per Lakner *et al.* 2005; Storm & Wagner, 2015). This enabled us to make sense of the incidents. A supplementary strategy involved the use of 'Documentary Research' (as per Scott, 1990) given that the data was from documentary sources such as newspaper and internet articles. We designed the methodological framework of the study in this way because as experienced entrepreneurship and management school Scholars, we had prior experience of employing the methods and thus were confident that they were both appropriate and robust.

We then conducted an analysis of UK based alleged and confirmed Food-fraud cases, some of whom were positioned as being 'scandals' with the associated narrative. Firstly, it was necessary to select an appropriate framework. We utilised the Storm and Wagner model and the framework of Gottschalk and Benson (2020) relating to denials; justification; excuses; and apologies. From this framework we developed a theorised model of the typical Food-fraud scandal. This exercise revealed common embedded themes and scripts. Secondly, we developed a data collection framework. We were already aware of many of the documented 'so-called scandals' herein. To augment this pre-existing knowledge, we conducted a netnographic-search of the internet using the terms 'food-fraud' and 'food-scandals' (Kozinets, 2015). By restricting the search to UK cases, we ensured compatibility and contextuality. We identified a list of 50 such cases over the timeframe of the study (1970s-2018) but stopped at 50 cases because of the large amount of data to be analysed manually. We read the raw data from the media reports [mainly newspaper and magazine articles located on the internet], excluding those that did not mention the word 'scandal'. This

allowed us to arrive at our purposeful sample of eight cases. The eight cases all related to the food supply chain in one form or another. We conducted a qualitative analysis (as per the advice of Grbich, 2013) and coded the data manually by using key words and themes using post-it notes to arrange and rearrange emerging patterns and themes. The emergent data was subjected to an iterative 'thematic analysis' by compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the analysed data (as per Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) to ensure methodological rigour. We then employed 'textual analysis' techniques (Allen, 2017) and 'Close Reading' (Craig, Garrott & Amernic, 2001; Amernic & Craig, 2006) to uncover key messages embedded in the scandal scripts. We excluded scenarios that did not involve close media scrutiny. This deliberate, systematic strategy allowed a multiplicity of scandal types to emerge – including local, national and international. These covered a wide gamut from fraudulent activities to breaches of hygiene and safety regulations. We quickly reached saturation point in relation to the scandal scripts.

Section Summary

- It is important to design an appropriate methodological framework that is easy to use and understand and close reading can be utilised and applied intuitively because it is not a mechanistic methodology or technique.

- The conceptual framework consisting of textual analysis / close reading / documentary research permits the researcher to conduct an intuitive and nuanced analysis of a complex phenomenon and arrive at an empirically grounded set of findings.

- This is important because when dealing with data from the media and with any documentary source including internet articles, the text being 'read' is already an interpretation of events through the eyes of the journalist or reporter. The articles are often

morally and judgementally framed and full of 'thick description' (as per Geertz, 1973) which can obfuscate analytical thought and close reading allowing a return to 'thin description' (Love, 2013). This is important because in concentrating on the minutia we can become lost in the detail and lose sight of the overall main message.

Research Practicalities

There were many practical and ethical considerations we had to navigate in achieving publication of the 'so-called scandal' study (Smith et al., 2002) and these related to ethical issues and the attribution of fairness when working with documentary research material where the original article which formed the basis of our data was written by a journalist in a particular context and for a specific purpose. We needed to be aware of the potential for journalistic bias and for often judgemental language in the scripts. To combat this, we ensured that we gathered our data from numerous corroborating sources, as is sound practice in both investigative practice and in academic writing. One has to learn to recognise syndicated journalism where the same article can appear in several media outlets; corroboration via sources is not as easy as simply checking if the data has been published elsewhere. Journalists, editors and publishers can make mistakes. This necessitates spending a considerable amount of time online locating other sources of information to verify and corroborate facts. This is time-consuming and necessary to seek to avoid repeating untruths which could end in legal challenges. We became adept in utilising 'Narrative Inquiry' techniques employed by journalists (as per Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Hunter, 2009) which entails scrupulous note taking to record the sources of information utilised in order to rebut any challenges regarding the veracity of the story told. We had to learn how to think like investigative journalists and to conduct genre analysis to question journalism's implicit authority over the truth (see Buoziz & Creech, 2017).

Combining multiple researchers' expertise and skills is required when operating within a multi-method methodological approach and across disciplinary boundaries. This is important because criminologists and entreprenologists have differently constructed world views of what is important and what is not, and where to start and end their studies. For example, if a criminologist finds evidence of entrepreneurial behaviour in a specific crime type, they will make the entrepreneurial behaviour a specific finding; whereas if entreprenologists locate the same entrepreneurial behaviour they will attempt to trace it back to other sociological variables. For criminologists the entrepreneurial behaviour is the finding, the explanation and the end of the study **but** for the entreprenologists it is the beginning of their quest to achieve *verstehen*. Criminologists and entreprenologists think differently which can lead to the development of a silo mentality. The researcher's expertise and skills in this research team included - knowledge in the disciplines of entrepreneurship, criminology, business management and food science qualifying the research as being multi-disciplinary in nature. Skills included abilities in research design, especially multimethod approaches, textual and close reading, evidence synthesis, iterative data analysis, framework development both structured and diagrammatic frameworks. Using a combination of methods within an iterative approach requires initial grounding in theoretical concepts and existing literature and then a spiral feedback process to reground findings in the literature which must be fully supported by researchers.

Constraints include the challenge of only working with publicly available data which may mean that some aspects of cases are not available to support theory building. Ethical considerations mean that the nature of the evidence and the degree of subjectivity or objectivity must be determined so that only evidence-based assertions are made. The eight

case studies were drawn from existing public sources as access to other evidence was not available to the researchers and this was a limitation of the study.

Section Summary:

- A combination of researcher expertise and skills is required within a multi-method methodological approach.

- Using multiple methods within an iterative approach requires initial theoretical grounding and then a spiral feedback process to reground findings in the literature.

- Researching across disciplines is time intensive due to the considerable burden of reading across literatures.

- Researchers lay themselves open to criticisms when using novel frameworks or methodologies.

- Ethical considerations include the nature of the evidence, the degree of subjectivity or objectivity, and the fairness in interpretation and representation especially if the researchers only have access to publicly available evidence.

Method in Action

By employing the methods discussed above, the research project played out well in reality because in conducting qualitative research using narrative analysis, close reading, documentary research and narrative inquiry techniques there are well documented procedures and protocols to follow. Furthermore, the diverse elements are all compatible with each other and easy to learn and use. The research went very much according to plan. From a perusal of the relevant literature, case details and from the analysis process we developed a graphical conceptual model of the typical anatomy of a food-fraud scandal. These phases included in the graphical conceptual model emerged from a narrative overview

of the data analysis stage. The phases captured the incident, shock or event, the incident amplification phase, the cascade effect, the emergent narrative and the retrospective discourse, leading to the scandal as remembered. Synthesising the literatures of food-fraud and scandal enabled us to develop a protean conceptual model of the anatomy of a typical food-fraud scandal. See Figure 1 below:
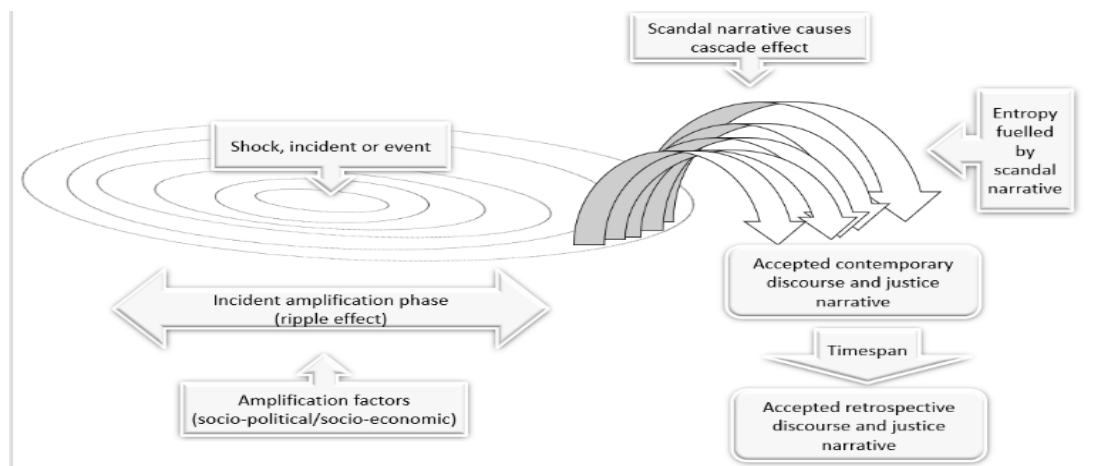

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the anatomy of a typical food-fraud scandal (Smith et al., 2022).

This was the most significant finding of the study and the figure is the central focus and output generated from the original study (Smith et al., 2022) because it describes the processual nature of the development of a typical scandal. This finding can be used by investigators to develop a more nuanced understanding of the processes involved and help them understand what is happening and why protagonists may be behaving and communication in a specific way, namely because they are performing to a universally understood script or playbook of what is expected of them.

Nevertheless, there were some problems during the analysis process. The first relates to finding the correct balance between presenting an analysis properly and presenting enough narrative exposition (Bennett, 1986; Josselson, 2006) in relation to the chosen cases to make them understandable to readers. This proved to be quite problematic in terms of minimising

the word count for the journal guidelines, because one cannot separate the case stories from their storied realm, nor the context of the story. The researchers must present enough of the case story to ensure readers understand the context. This entails acting as a narrator to guide the readers through the close readings and interpretations of the separate incidents under scrutiny. In many respects the eight cases presented are based on a double hermeneutic in that the raw data was authored by journalists, but the repurposed stories are interpretations of those scripts. For readers interest in this aspect of the cases, an exposition entails narrating a comprehensive storied explanation (https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-exposition-definition/). The end result is that the tables in the original study occupied a large proportion of the word count taking space away from presenting findings and discussion.

Another problem related to that of maintaining objectivity. Writing the eight cases was problematic because interpretative description of the cases can change the context, and it is not enough to simply rely on the fact that in being published in a newspaper or broadcast on the media that the data is sound because it is in the public sphere. When this occurs, it is necessary to emphasise that the interpretation is based on allegations made by others. The danger of 'reading-between-the-lines' means narrative inference can be said to suggest culpability when this is not intended by the researchers. This causes a level of researchers' anxiety over the exact wording used and the risk of interpretation of an often nuanced narrative and inadvertent inference being drawn by some readers that could cause a potential challenge to the rigor, accuracy and robustness of the research. These are very real challenges and problems.

Section Summary:

- The iterative nature of the research means that researchers have to be open to the ways in which the research question can be addressed change and evolve through the research.

- Some cases may look promising, but as evidence emerges, they need to be critiqued and refined and then may not meet the final screening criteria so are not included. This may mean that the time spent on case development can be significant.

- Multiple inferences can be drawn from the researchers' narrative, which may be unintended, creating anxiety about how narratives may be incorrectly interpreted, and challenges to the rigor, accuracy and robustness of the research.

Practical Lessons Learned

From a practical perspective we re-learned the advantages and disadvantages of iterative case study research and how to best undertake iterative, interpretivist, pragmatic studies where we need to understand the multiple influences and potential bias associated with our positionality and with the data generated from the research. As mentioned in the research in action section above, there were many practical lessons learned from conducting the research.

On reflection, and looking back at the exercise, as is often the case with qualitative studies the writing up period of the research exercise was most problematic as it entailed achieving the correct balance between storytelling, providing a detailed exposition of the facts, and presenting the analysis. The most practical lesson we learned was the need for scrupulous recording of how our interpretations were drawn from the data and materials and to avoid the dangers of over-reaching in the narrative to ensure that not only was the storytelling factually correct but that we scrutinised the use of named individuals. Writing up the research was probably aided by the experience of the qualitative researchers in using these methods

in other publications and knowing the recognised pitfalls to avoid. It is difficult to articulate what we would do differently other than to write up the research as a larger monograph so we could do more justice to the eight cases and perhaps expand on the number included. This is a distinct possibility in the future. We would advise readers planning to do their own research projects based on the methodologies used in Smith et al., (2022) to get on with it and enjoy it. Familiarise yourselves with the processes and protocols involved but 'own them' and make them your own work. Do not try to follow protocols slavishly. Be prepared to write and rewrite the material several times, but avoid the sin of perfectionism, especially as this methodological approach only focuses on publicly available data. There is no such thing as a perfect publication because everything can be improved on. Ask colleagues to read the iterative drafts to ensure that readers will understand the main points you want to get across to readers.

Section Summary -

- Enjoy the research process, write with confidence and own it.…

- Be prepared to write and rewrite material several times as you reflect on the text and improve the narrative and argument.

- Beware of falling into the trap of expecting perfectionism.

Conclusion

The most significant findings of the study were to corroborate earlier research (Smith & McElwee, 2019) that there is an implicit connection between Food-fraud and the food system itself in that there is obvious collusion between criminal businesses, industry insiders and organised crime which provide opportunities for food-related criminal behaviours to occur. Additionally, these entrepreneurial 'bad actors' can benefit from the perpetuation of so-

called scandal scripts because it removes the spotlight from their systematic criminal activities.

We are confident that our original study can act as a template for other researchers to utilise to learn how to operationalise the qualitative methodologies discussed herein, particularly in relation to gaining better understanding of how the method/approach can be tailored to fit different contexts. Our choice of further reading materials is designed to act as a 'how to' get started section.

There are numerous examples of fraud and scandals in every part of the economy and on every continent which result in public outcries about the criminality and industry malpractices which underpin them. By following or adapting our template for analysing so-called scandals other scholars will be able to recognise and understand the 'scripted' nature of the scandal narrative influencing both their revelation and resolution. They will then be able to model and better understand how to investigate and theorise these incidents in context. The more studies there are which repeat our framework, then a more nuanced understanding will be developed in a global context. From an investigative perspective, such studies will widen the body of knowledge on how to read the signals that link to an incident and a given modus operandi and as a consequence enables relevant actors to take more appropriate and timely responsive actions. We hope that such expansionist studies of other so-called scandals will prove the veracity and utility of our model in an academic and practical context.

Despite being all seasoned and very experienced Professors, we were surprised about how our study has already impacted on the policy field. One of the reasons we as academics research and write articles is to make an impact on policy and practice in real time. Getting work acknowledged and noticed is hard, and many potentially helpful studies often go

unnoticed. Building in a dissemination strategy into academic research study is now a must for academics, many of whom do not have a social media presence. For example, the first and third authors do not have such a presence. However, the second author, who is social media savvy, highlighted the study on her social media accounts for wider dissemination of its findings. This facet along with the scrupulous editing and hard work mentioned above paid dividends because immediately following the publication of the original study there was instantaneous industry and regulator interest. The European Commission signposted the paper in its edition of the e-published monthly Food Fraud Summary in January, see https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/food-fraud-summary-january-2022_en .

In addition, the Executive Director of the Food Authenticity Network (FAN) (www.foodauthenticity.global) read the second author's LinkedIn post on the publication and invited her to give a presentation about the study at the annual meeting of the Food Authenticity Centres of Expertise in March 2022. Many European and UK regulatory (Food Standards Scotland, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affrairs and the National Food Crime Unit) and regulator-industry collaborative groups were represented increasing the awareness/impact of the study. The study was also highlighted in a blog on FAN on 26 January 2022; FAN has a current membership of 3,278 members from 93 countries and in 2021, over 34,000 users from 165 countries accessed the website. In addition, Professor Petter Gottschalk, one of the authors of the study by Gottschalk and Benson (2020) on the evolution of corporate accounts scandals contacted the first author and expressed his appreciation of our study in expanding their scandal paradigm. Collectively, such feedback is rare.

Discussion questions

1. Is data saturation an important aspect of case study research?

2. Does representativeness matter in conceptual, iterative research?

3. How can decisions on the sample size/distribution influence qualitative research?

4. What is important in developing graphical conceptual diagrams?

5. How could you adapt the methodology to study other so-called scandal or food-fraud contexts?

Multiple choice questions

1. Food fraud is associated with intentional actions to defraud others. How might this factor influence the evidence that is available for researchers? Choose the correct answer
   a. The methodologies used are limited by the evidence that the researchers can access in a given context. CORRECT
   b. Any methodology, or combination of methods can be used.
   c. Analysis of illicit activity requires specific criminology theory based methods

2. Which combination of methods requires initial grounding in theoretical concepts and existing literature and then a spiral feedback process to reground findings in the literature?
   a. Iterative approach CORRECT
   b. Inductive approach
   c. Deductive approach

3. What was the 'ripple effect' described in this paper
   a. Incident amplification phase CORRECT
   b. Entropy phase
   c. Post incident phase

4. Using data from a variety of sources and methodologies in qualitative research can help to:
   a. Make the study rigorous.
   b. Make the study deductive
   c. Reach data saturation CORRECT

Further reading

Amernic, J., & Craig, R., (2006). CEO Speak: The language of corporate leadership. London: McGill Queen's University Press. ISBN: 9780773533202
[This text is an essential read because it presents 12 studies where different aspects of close reading are exposed with advice on various techniques utilised].

Brummett, B., (2019). *Techniques of Close Reading*. London: Sage.
https://books.google.com/books/about/Techniques_of_Close_Reading.html?..
[This text concentrates on a variety of close reading techniques].

Dearing, V.A., (1959). *Manual of Textual Analysis.* University of California Press. Available at https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520345447

[This text provides an overview of textual analysis methods using examples from the bible].

Grbich, C., (2013). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An introduction*. London: Sage. https://books.google.com/books/about/Qualitative_Data_Analysis.html?id=...

[This text is an introduction to conducting analysis in qualitative research].

Reissman, C.K., (1993). *Narrative Analysis*. Qualitative Research Methods Series, London: Sage. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1993-98991-000

[An introductory text to narrative analysis, setting out the basics].

Schur, D. (1998). *An introduction to close reading.* Harvard University. Available at https://media.gradebuddy.com/documents/2651162/2e637c34-5bca-4e19-af0a-ed3c86596017.pdf.

[This text provides an easy-to-follow overview of the practice and how to apply it].

Web resources

Hunter, M.L., (ed.), (2009). *Story-Based Inquiry. A Manual for Investigative Journalists*, Unesco Report. ISBN: 9-789231-041891, Available at https://www.storybasedinquiry.com/manuals

[This manual sets out procedures/protocols for story-based inquiry methods].

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