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Title: Analysing case study data in the IMP tradition: Using Ethnographic Content Analysis for social media data analysis

Abstract: Social media (SM) platforms are increasingly being employed by business-to-business (B2B) marketing practitioners. Although in its infancy, this is reflected by the recent surge in B2B social media research publications. Given the newness of this research space, the purpose of this paper is to review the wide ranging methodological approaches currently adopted by publications in SM B2B research to date, highlighting the most commonly used approaches and their potential advantages and limitations. The authors propose the use of an emerging form of data analysis, Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA), an approach that adds the necessary reflexivity and flexibility required to study SM B2B phenomena. The authors demonstrate its applicability when coupled with an Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) perspective, highlighting their similarities and the appropriateness of the two in situ for the progression of the industrial marketing field.

Keywords: Social Media, Ethnographic Content Analysis, IMP Research, B2B Relationships, Entrepreneurship, Business Networks

Paper type: Competitive paper

INTRODUCTION:

Social media (SM) platforms are increasingly being employed by business-to-business (B2B) marketing practitioners (Salo, 2017). For the entrepreneurial venture, its low resource commitment, ease of implementation and simplicity to use (Barnes et al., 2012; Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, 2015) compared to traditional marketing communications has particular appeal as an alternative means for the development, use and creation of value within B2B marketing relationships and networks (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). This growing importance of social media in B2B marketing practice is mirrored by recent calls in the academic space for more empirically grounded studies (LaPlaca, 2013; Salo, 2017), particularly in an entrepreneurial context (Drummond et al., 2018; Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). Whilst this presents exciting opportunities, a potential challenge remains to be addressed, relating to the methods and analysis tools employed for theory development in SM B2B research. The addition of SM presents a unique challenge in relational based case study research - an approach favoured for exploratory research in novel areas (Yin, 2003) and when studying complex processes (La Rocca, Hoholm, & Mørk, 2017) - due to the necessity to analyse substantial data sets of textual, visual, or otherwise non-thematic data. This introduces complex analysis issues that require new and creative solutions (Creswell, 2013). The core aim of this paper is to present Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) (Altheide, 1987) as an effective methodological analysis tool to capture the nature of interactions in an SM B2B marketing context, and in particular, within the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) tradition. Our contribution rests in detailing how ECA can be employed effectively when studying SM in a B2B context.

METHODS IN SOCIAL MEDIA B2B RESEARCH:

To address the study objective, the authors first examined the existing literature on social media in the B2B domain. As an analysis and methodologically focused paper, we were concerned

with exploring parts of the research process as opposed to empirical findings (Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2010). This was achieved by conducting searches in leading industrial marketing journals. Although a review of international industrial marketing based journals may not capture all of the research in this subject area, they represent an acceptable vista from which to view the norms of the field as they act as ‘gatekeepers’ of the peer review system (Piekkari et al., 2010). We purposively omitted any literature review based publications, as we are concerned with empirical papers that demonstrate the use of methods of SM data collection and analysis that would inform our research. We then excluded quantitative studies at this point, as we are concerned primarily with how the analysis is carried out by researchers in areas of qualitative studies, suggested as more useful in producing illuminating results on the subject (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). This resulted in fifteen studies, one of which utilised mixed methods (Siamagka et al., 2015).

A range of study designs were implemented, from multi-case studies (Pagani & Pardo, 2017) to grounded theory (Lacoste, 2016) and netnography (Quinton & Wilson, 2016; Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). Several forms of analysis were employed ranging from thematic analysis (Barnes et al., 2012; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) to constant comparative analysis (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013) to multimodal discourse analysis (Mehmet & Clarke, 2016). A further number of studies implemented the use of CAQDAS software to aid in data management (Drummond et al., 2018), while observations, qualitative surveys, interviews and content/communication exchanged between users comprised the primary data vessels of choice for most studies (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017; Quinton & Wilson, 2016; Siamagka et al., 2015; Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013).

The most commonly employed research design, the case study approach, holds significant value in the pursuit of knowledge within the social media B2B research domain. The case study design is useful in new research scenarios, when investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context, where current theories are inadequate, permitting the development of new theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). It acknowledges the importance of the phenomenon’s context and allows the researchers to understand participant interactions in context (Baxter & Jack, 2008), capturing the dynamics of the study phenomenon i.e. SM platforms (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). The case study design allows for multiple cases and sources of data, enhancing validity and credibility of the study through data triangulation, and constructing more robust theory as a result (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). The multi-method case study approach is a growing qualitative methodological approach for B2B marketing research (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010), particularly suitable for examining how networks work in different settings and contexts, reflected by the significant number of social media B2B studies employing case studies.

SM research investigations necessitate appropriate data collection methods and in many of these studies, interviews were employed as a predominant means to collect empirical data (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Mehmet & Clarke, 2016). Their flexible procedures mean they are an accommodating method widely used in qualitative research, allowing more diversity in participant answers and richer data (Bryman, 2012). Researchers can gain an insiders perspective on the subject topic (Krippendorff, 2004) and lends itself well to case study methodology (Johnston, Leach, & Liu, 1999). Although several studies used descriptive, three-step forms of thematisation in their data analysis (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016), the focus is placed upon interview data and only a scattering explicitly analyse the SM data itself to further substantiate findings and develop frameworks (Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Quinton &

Wilson, 2016). Fewer still detail how they manage and analyse these inherently significant datasets (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). Due to the large amount of data created in the processes of SM data collection and consequently the significant complex levels of coding involved, detailed SM B2B analysis necessitates NVivo to make findings more credible and dependable, enhancing validity and reliability of study findings (Ryan, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, this is not a solution to the analysis complexities that come with using SM data sets for research into B2B relationships and networks. NVivo is simply a management tool and although it can be helpful in collating the data (Ryan, 2009), more innovative forms of analysis need to be explored to tap into the vast opportunity afforded by studying networks over SM (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013) and the detail it deserves to develop relevant theory in the area.

Our overview demonstrates a variety of approaches providing compelling research in this novel area. However, few studies utilise the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group’s perspective (Håkansson, 1982; Snehota & Hakansson, 1995), perplexing given the relevance and similarities between social media and the discipline (Singaraju et al., 2016; Sood & Pattinson, 2012). For example the IMP model’s focus on person-to-person interaction also lies at the heart of social media interactions (Sood & Pattinson, 2012). The IMP discipline primarily utilises qualitative methodologies, especially the use of case study approaches (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Håkansson, 1982). As discussed, interviews lend themselves to the case study research design (Johnston et al., 1999). For this reason, studies that employ an interaction or network approach (Håkansson, 1982; Snehota & Hakansson, 1995) also utilise interviews as a means for primary data collection. This approach is growing in importance in B2B marketing and recent SM B2B publications signify its applicability (Pagani & Pardo, 2017). Nonetheless, these studies only scratch the surface of the potential held by studying SM B2B relationships and networks from the IMP perspective. This represents a significant gap and within the IMP research domain specifically, we envision an interesting lens with which to continue this deluge of academic material. In light of the evident gaps within the extant literature, namely the lack of SM B2B IMP-based research and the need for more innovative analysis approaches for SM data, we introduce Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) as an addition to the researcher’s analysis toolkit to deal with SM data’s unique complexities.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTENT ANALYSIS IN IMP-BASED SOCIAL MEDIA BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS RESEARCH:

The ECA approach is a reflexive form of content analysis, employing an iterative approach towards concept development, data collection, and emergent data analysis (Altheide, 1987). Within this qualitative content analysis technique, ethnography, in this sense, refers to describing people and their culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and the subject matter i.e. humans engaged in meaningful behaviour, which should guide the study’s enquiry and research orientation (Altheide, 1987). An overview of the ECA method is detailed in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Overview of Ethnographic Content Analysis

<i>What is it?</i>	ECA is a qualitative content analysis technique used to locate, identify, and thematically analyse text or documents, created by David L. Altheide (1987) to combine qualitative methods of ethnography with the quantitative methods of traditional content analysis. ECA is very flexible, consisting of a ‘reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation’ (Altheide, 1987, Pg.68).
<i>What is it used for?</i>	ECA takes ethnographers research tools, applies them to texts and attempts to develop deep contextual understanding of textual meanings (Bernhard, Futrell, & Harper, 2010). Counting the number of times a word appears does not communicate the underlying latent content (Krippendorff, 2004).

Where is it used?

Qualitative content analysis approaches like ECA are heavily used within the German-speaking scientific community, with little attention paid to the method internationally (Kohlbacher, 2006). It is often used in nursing research (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). As a discipline in its infancy, it is not very well defined in the literature, requiring further improvement and development (Kohlbacher, 2006) and is often times confused with thematic analysis.

What is its application to SM B2B research?

Initial categories can be formed from previous studies (Smith, Sells, & Clevenger, 1994) completed or practice based inferences. Document analysis (social media interactions included) is fieldwork, allows concepts and categories to emerge inductively during analysis. Employs a reflexive approach, an iterative process where data interpretation is constantly compared (Altheide, 1987). Orientated towards concept development, data collection, and emergent data analysis (Altheide, 1987), all required by SM B2B research as a novel domain.

What steps are involved?

Derived from Altheide's guide (Bryman, 2012), we establish the steps involved in ECA for SM B2B studies as requiring the researcher to;

- Step 1: Generate research questions and familiarise with documents
- Step 2: Generate initial categories from open coding process and/or literature review
- Step 3: Draft schedule for data collection, test and revise with documents
- Step 4: Employ schedule for the collection and analysis of secondary data set
- Step 5: Iterative coding process as empirical data is added
- Step 6: Generate new/consolidate existing categories
- Step 7: Continuously revise and re-code until satisfactory conclusion to codes and categories reached.
- Step 8: Formulate empirical based models or frameworks from final categories

Essentially, ECA takes ethnographers research tools, applies them to texts and attempts to develop deep contextual understanding of textual meanings in order to create and verify theoretical relationships (Bernhard et al., 2010). Due to the disciplines infancy, it remains ambiguous and ill-defined in the literature, requiring further development (Kohlbacher, 2006). ECA, as a form of qualitative content analysis, departs from the traditionally quantitative-orientated form. The need for reflexive and adaptive methods for SM B2B research has been discussed ad nauseam and ECA has several characteristics that make it particularly orientated towards this purpose. ECA focuses on the interaction of key participants, its ethnographic format giving researchers a better opportunity at understanding humans engaged in meaningful behaviour (Altheide, 1987). The importance of secondary data, such as social media interactions, is evident in the ECA format as it is used regularly in document analysis and considers it fieldwork (Altheide, 1987). Along with its ability to retrospectively analyse data (Bernhard et al., 2010), these attributes make it appropriate for SM B2B IMP-based research as there is a requirement to collect and analyse significant amounts of SM data in the form of text and images to uncover meanings within these phenomena.

Its flexibility as a reflexive method allows for qualitative and complex inductive-style studies aiming to be systematic and analytic but not rigid (Altheide, 1987; Bryman, 2012). Social media studies may require the flexibility provided by ECA to determine B2B network actor's interactions. The ability to incorporate emerging evidence and category refinement (Altheide, 1987; Bryman, 2012) is required for many social media studies as new data of interaction may become necessary to include as research progresses, while its ethnographic approach allows for more depth and understanding of the layers of complexity of the topic through both numerical and narrative data (Bryman, 2012; Smith et al., 1994). ECA is an appropriate means of analysis for mass communications such as social media, and is revered as most applicable for studying communications and mass media data (Kohlbacher, 2006). ECA is particularly pertinent for use with the case study approach. Its openness and ability to deal with complexity, integration of different materials of evidence as well as quantitative steps of analysis, correlate with the theory building role of case study approaches used in IMP

research that are designed to develop a holistic view of the process or anomaly being studied (Eisenhardt, 1989; Kohlbacher, 2006). ECA's use with computer software such as NVivo bring with it increased validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The centrality of the researcher to the analysis is important as the reflexive ECA method allows for the investigator to be highly interactive in concept development, data collection and analysis. It requires them to constantly revise categories revealed from the data collection and analysis (Altheide, 1987; Bryman, 2012). This will allow the researcher to develop a good understanding of the complex topic at hand, necessary to fully understand business activities that are integrated or created in SM interaction between network actors.

The application of ECA towards SM B2B IMP-based studies holds significant value for the advancement of the field. Although guides for utilising ECA in various research domains exist, they remain rather ambiguous and limited (Bryman, 2012). Thus, we have created a specific set of steps to adhere to when conducting SM B2B IMP-based studies that use a case study research design, located in *Table 1, Row 5 (What steps are involved)*. Of note, due to the iterative and reflexive nature of the ECA approach itself, these steps cannot be viewed as an exact linear process, following from step to step in straight succession. This guide should be viewed as having a starting point (Step 1 and 2) and an end stage upon data saturation or satisfactory conclusion of categorisation (Step 7 and 8). However, the steps in between, although suggested below in a linear fashion concerning SM B2B IMP-based research, may coalesce depending on several variables including study context, limitations of data collection instruments, and the social media sites themselves.

In step 1, the researchers are required to focus on the development of the research question(s) and familiarise themselves with documents to be studied. The researchers should then begin to generate initial categories from either an open coding process or from a literature review in step 2, where the emphasis is placed on implementing the first stage of a reflexive coding practice fundamental to the ECA approach. Step 3 requires a draft schedule for data collection to be drawn up, with a small set of SM data then collected, tested and the codes revised with document input. Step 4 moves beyond the initial SM data sample once the draft schedule has been resolved and the final coding guide or schedule has been decided upon by the researcher(s) or investigative team. This schedule, which will be iteratively developed in an ECA approach, is employed to a much larger set of SM data. At this point, the nature of the ECA approach becomes more impactful, as in step 5 and 6, an iterative degree of coding is instituted as empirical data is added, while new categories may be generated or existing codes consolidated or disregarded as the coding process becomes more intricate. In this regard, these steps are inherently linked and their lines become blurred, as depending on the views or constraints of the researchers, empirical data i.e. interview data may be collected and analysed using the schedule alongside the SM data, or after the fact. This process can become boundless, highlighted by our seventh step where the investigators must continuously revise and re-code until satisfactory conclusion to the categories is reached. This particular step requires the researcher(s) to reach a point of data saturation, wherein if multiple principal investigators or coding personnel are involved, a lengthy process can ensue to reach a consensus. At that time, the data being collected should fit into the iteratively constructed categories, revealing no new codes that demonstrate novel findings with regards to the specific phenomenon. Finally, once no new data need to be added to the study, step 8 and the formulation of empirical based models or frameworks from final categories can be implemented.

CONCLUSION:

Social media is becoming increasingly relevant to both industrial marketing practitioners and academics alike, reflecting the recent surge in B2B SM research (Salo, 2017). In pursuit of knowledge and understanding of a phenomena that are inherently dynamic and ever-changing in nature, social media investigations pose unique challenges for researchers which require adaptations of existing, and development of novel, research methods. This paper examines those currently utilised methods in SM B2B research, and gives a detailed account of how the use of Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) can tackle the issue of substantial data sets produced by this form of research.

Few SM B2B studies utilise an interaction and network approach, striking given that the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) models (Håkansson, 1982; Snehota & Hakansson, 1995) underpin the world of social technology and how B2B firms interact, so developing research that links SM and IMP are vital for the progression of the industrial marketing field (Sood & Pattinson, 2012). Particularly with regards to non-linear or ‘messy’ case study research used in IMP research, innovative practices are likely to be used (Piekkari et al., 2010). The authors introduce the Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) approach (Altheide, 1987) as a means to reflexively analyse dynamic social media data that can be used for the development of robust theory and to empirically test conceptual frameworks in situ. ECA’s iterative and flexible nature make it an interesting and relevant set of procedures to investigate B2B social media phenomena as they emerge over time, particularly when utilised with case studies and interview data, the prevailing qualitative methodologies and methods of data collection respectively, for this type of research (Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Piekkari et al., 2010).

The authors argue that ECA, as a method of analysis, has the potential to bridge the process gap by detailing how change and development occurs within networks, acting as a vehicle for theory building incrementally as it moves through a recursive cycle of conceptualisation, data collection, and analysis (Altheide, 1987). Our main contribution is the creation of a comprehensive step-by-step guide of ECA’s use to advance the field of SM B2B research. The application of ECA in the IMP group is rare. By providing a detailed approach to employing this novel analysis method with an IMP perspective on B2B relationships and networks developed over social media, the authors endeavour to stoke further discussion on this topic. This detailed account of the ECA approach in action paves the way for future, empirically orientated research to be conducted. This should aid in the creation of evidence based frameworks or constructs within the SM B2B arena, adding to initial forays by academics in the field (Felix et al., 2017; Mehmet & Clarke, 2016; Lacoste, 2016). Our delineation of the ECA approach within a case study research design is one such means to investigate social media B2B topics of interest in this research community (Singaraju et al., 2016). The authors suggest further research is required to advance the domain, especially in the unique context of small, entrepreneurial ventures (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013; Drummond et al., 2018), resource-poor entities who may especially benefit from guides which detail effective social media B2B practices.

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