The Case Study Approach in Industrial Marketing: Insights from Research Practice

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1. Introduction

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a growth in the methodological literature on case studies in business and management research (with Eisenhardt 1989 and Yin 2003 the dominant sources), including texts on qualitative research in marketing (e.g. Belk 2006). However, the specific challenges associated with studying business networks have until recently received less attention (Halinen and Törnroos 2005). As Dubois and Araujo (2004, p. 207) have argued, understanding research methods in industrial networks means coming to terms with the case study, as this has been the 'methodology of choice' for researchers in the area. This popularity of case studies is not surprising, given the phenomenon under study: 'Because of the richness of the picture produced by case research, the approach is suitable to handle the complexity of network links among actors and can be used to trace the development of network changes over time' (Easton 1995, p. 480). In this paper, we seek to contribute to the emerging debate about applying the case 'methodology' to the study of industrial networks and industrial marketing. Unlike previous discussions, which have largely focused on the question of 'how research into industrial networks *might* be carried out' (Easton 1995, p. 411, our italics) – or even how they *should* be carried out – we are interested in the question of how it *has* been conducted. In this paper, we therefore review the use of the case study approach in industrial marketing journals over a ten-year period (1997-2006).

The approach we take in this paper, of looking at research practice in a particular field of study, begs a number of questions. The first is why, given the existence of an already voluminous literature on doing case studies (for an overview, see e.g. Gomm, Hammersely and Foster 2000), it is necessary to add to it at all, and why conducting case studies in industrial marketing should be any different to conducting them in other areas. Other industrial marketing researchers have argued that case study research in this area is indeed different, because of the nature of the phenomenon under study. Halinen and Törnroos (2005), building upon the work of Easton (1995), put forward four challenges associated with the application of case studies to industrial marketing and networks: network boundaries, complexity, the time dimension and case comparisons. Network boundaries are linked to the difficulties that industrial marketing researchers encounter in differentiating the content and context of a business network. In case study terms, such a challenge renders problematic the view of a case study as a bounded system (cf. Yin, 2003) and allows for flexibility in defining the boundaries around what constitutes the case. Similarly, network complexity and temporality raise practical difficulties as regards studying networks holistically and separating contemporaneous from historical events in a network, respectively. Context specificity also renders network cases unique, and therefore, difficult to compare with others.

While we agree with Halinen and Törnroos's insights, we would go further and argue, following Platt (1988), that the disciplinary context to which case studies are applied matters in a more fundamental way: that the definitions of what a case and a case study are, as well as the procedures for undertaking such research, vary across disciplinary boundaries. While these variations are in part due to differences in what is beheld (for example, the organizational context of industrial marketing contrasted with the study of the individual in consumer behaviour), they can also be traced to differences in the eye of the beholder. As the sociology of knowledge would suggest (for a view on science as a social process in the area of industrial marketing, see Morlacchi, Wilkinson and Young 2005), disciplinary conventions, traditions and norms fundamentally shape our understanding of what we conceive case studies to be and what standards for case research we subscribe to.

A second question raised by our approach is why we should consider research practice. Again, we follow Platt (1996), who points out that the methodological authorities that authors may be familiar with and even cite are only one influence on how research is conducted, and that perhaps a more substantial one is the empirical research that is published. Published case studies become the models and exemplars for future research, and in this way also shape conceptions of how research should be conducted. However, in her history of the case study in sociology, Platt (1996) found a divergence between the case research that was actually conducted as compared to the recommendations made in key methodological texts. It therefore cannot be assumed that methodological theory and research practice (i.e. 'methodologies-in-use', to borrow a term from Gummesson 2003) will coincide. Notions of 'good' case study research are, in the end, shaped by what is actually published in a field.

Once we understand case research as a set of conventions constructed by a particular community of scholars, research practice then becomes an important source of understanding on methodology. By conducting a content analysis of published case studies, we seek to provide insights into how the case study has been constructed by the industrial marketing community and the methodological conventions that are upheld. On the basis of our content analysis, we argue that we can discern tensions between three different notions of ‘good’ case study research in this scholarly domain: ‘best practice’ (in other words, the implicit or explicit standards that authors profess, the methodological authorities they cite and, inevitably, the standards we too apply in our analysis), ‘common’ practice (in other words, typical features of case study methodology as reported by authors) and ‘innovative’ practice (in other words, uncommon or novel practice).

Before proceeding further, we should pause to consider the disciplinary context for this paper. We would view the scholarly environment of the committed IMP case researcher as possibly a contradictory one. While case research may be ‘the primary tool’ (Dubois and Araujo 2004, p. 207) among industrial network researchers, this cannot be said about marketing generally. The status of qualitative and case research in marketing is, we would argue, still not well established among marketing departments, journal editors and reviewers. A recent content analysis of three marketing journals ‘reveals the continued dominance of quantitative research’ (Hanson and Grimmer 2007, p, 66). Of all the research articles published in the three journals, more than 70 per cent used quantitative methods. For many researchers, the legitimacy of qualitative research still needs to be defended. Thus, an early article to ‘advocate’ case research in marketing concludes by acknowledging that ‘significant problems remain for researchers who would adopt case research methods for their investigations into marketing phenomena’ (Bonoma 1985, p. 206). Twenty years later, it can be doubted whether, at a general level, much has changed. A case researcher cannot be assured of a positive reception when submitting to marketing journals or being evaluated by colleagues. The fact that qualitative research is still in the minority may explain why there are still many misunderstandings about qualitative methods. For instance, a recent content analysis of journals that included the major international marketing journals classified case studies as “secondary data” sources (see Yang, Wand and Su 2006, p. 607). In this environment there is a danger that case researchers try to conform to the norms of quantitative research, avoid the use of innovative methods, and, as a marginalised group, find that each generation of scholars needs to reinvent the methodological wheel rather than building on existing insights.

The paper is organised as follows. In the first section we provide an overview of the existing literature on case study methodology in industrial marketing and networks. In the following section, we discuss our process of reviewing published case studies, including the basis for journal selection, our classification of case studies and the codes we used for our content analysis. We then proceed to describe and analyze the practices that we found in our sample of case studies. In light of our review findings, we conclude this article with key observations about the current ‘state of the art’ of case study research in industrial marketing and networks.

2. Literature Review: Using Case Studies in Industrial Marketing Research

While the case study approach has been widely adopted in industrial marketing, there are varying opinions on *how* to employ this method in a rigorous manner in order to understand contemporary phenomena into business-to-business markets. Even the meaning of the term “case study” has been a matter of debate in the relevant literature. Despite the diversity of perspectives on “what is a case study?”, Yin’s (2003) guide is often considered a starting point for researchers who employ this method in the area of industrial marketing and networks. According to his definition, the case study is 'an empirical enquiry', using 'multiple sources of evidence', that 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context' when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. However, industrial marketing researchers have not accepted this definition uncritically. First, the specification that a case study concerns a contemporary phenomenon has been queried. As Dubois and Araujo (2004, p. 209) argue, the distinction between historical and contemporary events is impossible to maintain since '[h]istory is always encoded in the structures that shape current choices' (see also Woodside and Wilson 2003). Second, Dubois and Araujo (2004, p. 210) point out that the process of conducting case studies is even more 'open ended' than Yin's definition implies: the phenomenon and context may not be known in advance, but rather emerge in the course of enquiry.

This debate over Yin's conceptualization of the case study reflects, most fundamentally, different philosophical standpoints. Both Yin (2003) and Eisenhardt (1989), the two dominant authorities on case research in business studies, take a positivist approach to case studies. As alternatives, Easton (1998) advocates a critical realist approach to case research and Gummesson (2003) an interpretive one. Easton (1998) argues that realism and case research are well suited, given that realists do not hold that knowledge is the quest for universal, generalisable laws, but rather believe that causal mechanisms are fundamentally contingent, and their outcomes may vary depending on how causal powers are combined in any given situation. Gummesson (2003) argues that in fact all research is interpretive, and that all layers of the research 'edifice' – the philosophical foundation, data generation and analysis, and the presentation of results –

are infused with research subjectivity, intersubjectivity and the interaction between researcher and researched. Put simply, 'the systematic and objective pursuit of truth is a myth' (Gummesson 2003, p. 487).

Related to this are different understandings of the role of theory in case research. Easton (1995) argues that Yin reveals a preference for a deductive process, in which the researcher commences with theoretical propositions. Johnston, Leah and Liu (1999) argue that this deductive approach should be used for confirmatory, theory-testing research: the case researcher commences with theory and derives research propositions for testing (see also Johnston et al. 2000). While Johnston et al. (1999) do not explicitly link their theory-testing model to a particular philosophical standpoint, they do not question the standards of positivist quantitative research, and seek to show how, by following the 'systematic' research design they propose, 'the potential for research bias can be decreased' (p. 209). Similarly, Wilson and Woodside (1999, p. 216) seek to show how a degrees-of-freedom analysis can be used 'to link "traditional" (i.e., logical positivistic) hypothesis testing procedures to examine theoretical propositions in case study research'. According to this view, the 'lack of objectivity and methodological rigor' in case studies represent obstacles to be 'overcome' (Hillebrand, Kok and Biemans 2001, p. 656).

However, it has been argued that neither deduction nor induction captures the process of theory development (as opposed to theory testing) in case study research (Dubois and Araujo 2004). Case research is a flexible, emergent research design: to use a concept introduced by Ragin (1992), the process of doing case research is about deciding what the case is a case of. At the same time, an inductive, theory-free approach to the empirical world is an impossibility, and to some extent, case studies always involve some element of confirmatory research. Instead, Dubois and Gadde (2002) propose that theory development in case studies involves a process of ‘systematic combining’ in which there is a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical observation. They label this process ‘abductive’, as opposed to inductive or deductive, research. Thus, rather than seeking to minimize the evolving nature of case research through the a priori specification of propositions and a clear delineation of the boundaries of the study, advocates of the abductive view ‘regard the main strength of the [case] method as the deferral of these decisions’ (Dubois and Araujo 2004, p. 224).

Yin’s definition specifies that case studies use multiple sources of evidence to develop theory. As Easton (1995) points out, this logic of triangulation, in which different data sources converge on a single explanation, assumes away problems of incommensurability. Put simply, ‘How do we deal with situations where the data indicate opposite evidence?’ (Halinen and Törnroos 2005, p. 1295). Triangulation and the use of multiple data sources have received some consideration in industrial marketing research. While there is recognition that case studies should not be conflated with qualitative research (Easton 1995), mixed case study designs have not been analyzed in detail; rather, the main concern has been to find complements to interview data. Welch (2000) addresses the need identified by Easton (1995) for more longitudinal research by discussing the use of archival records and considers how the strengths of this unobtrusive method can be used to complement data from interviews. Woodside and Wilson (2003) also provide a useful discussion on the limitation of interview data. They argue that interviews should be seen as a form of ‘presentational data’, with informants producing in their responses ‘manufactured image of idealized doing’ (p. 498). To understand actual activities and routines performed by organizational members, it is necessary to investigate ‘operational data’, which can be gained through observations and the analysis of documents. They caution that the ‘verbalized thoughts’ of individuals do not provide access to the full sensemaking process and mental models of individuals, which often involve unconscious processes which may not be easily surfaced into conscious processes. Overall, the reliance on interviews and ‘snapshot’ studies have been called into question.

Thus, the methodological discussion on case research in industrial marketing shows considerable diversity in terms of philosophical underpinnings, research objectives, and treatment of data sources. Yin is a strong influence, but has not been accepted uncritically, and alternative approaches have been proposed, although this has stopped short of more radical perspectives such as postmodernism, social constructivism and critical approaches (for an example of a more critical approach to case studies, see Kates’s 2006 review of the extensive case method in consumer research). Thus, our review of the methodological literature in industrial marketing suggests that no single understanding of ‘good’ case study research, or single set of ‘best’ practices, prevails. Rather, notions of ‘good’ case study research are very dependent on the author’s philosophical assumptions and understanding of the relationship between theory and empirical observation. Eckstein (1992, p. 130) suggests that given the lack of agreement, it is perhaps best to consider the case study “a broad generic concept”. Different forms of case studies may arise from the decisions that the researcher takes with regard to various activities. This will be the approach we take in the review, to which we now turn.

3. Review process

Similar to case study researchers, we delve into "the real life context", i.e. industrial marketing and network research, in order to understand the use of the case study approach. Our focus remains on case study research into industrial networks, consistent with our discipline-specific approach. Hence, we selected for analysis the key journals that concentrate on industrial marketing: 1*) Industrial Marketing Management (IMM)*, 2*) Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing (JBIM)* and 3) *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing (JBBM)*. These journals were described by Woodside (1997, p. 177) as three out of the four 'leading double-blind refereed publications in the topic areas of business and industrial marketing'. The fourth, *Advances in Business Marketing and Purchasing*, was excluded on the basis that it is a book series, and our review is limited to international refereed journals. While a review of international refereed journals does not capture all the research in a field, these sources are a good indication of the norms that prevail, given the 'gatekeeping' function of the peer review system.

Case studies published over a 10-year period were analysed (1997-2006) – a time period, which encompasses the growing influence of the IMP Group, and an increasing interest in both the theory and practice of case study research. The number of papers for analysis resulting from the three journals is illustrated in Table 1. The first step in the review was to classify the articles in each journal into the following categories: conceptual, quantitative, qualitative, mixed, practitioner and methodological. Included in the 'conceptual' category were articles that contained theoretical models and frameworks, literature reviews, or overviews of contemporary developments in marketing. Articles were classified as quantitative if they predominantly relied on numerical data collection and analysis. In order to qualify as mixed, a study had to do more than include interviews as a pilot stage or pretest of a questionnaire, but rather, the data from both qualitative and quantitative parts had to be used in the analysis. Equally, a qualitative article that included some frequency counts in the analysis was not classified as mixed. Practitioner articles were illustrations of empirical phenomena that did not seek to 'match' theory with the empirical world. Methodological articles were those that, like the present paper, sought to examine aspects of the research process rather than report on empirical findings. At this stage, articles were also classified according to whether they were qualitative, mixed or even quantitative case studies.

Table 1: Number of Articles Examined by Year and Publication

Year **Journal**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**Total**
IMM	46	39	50	48	50	66	62	71	77	82	**591**
JBBM	11	20	9	9	9	14	11	14	12	12	**121**
JBIM	26	29	27	28	32	34	35	36	37	58	**342**
Total	83	88	86	85	91	114	108	121	126	152	1054

A content analysis (largely qualitative, but also involving simple frequency counts) of the articles that employed the case study method was conducted independently by the three authors of the paper. All articles were double-coded and in turn, checked for coding accuracy, and any differences of opinion were discussed. The coding template incorporated key themes discussed in relevant methodological literature (see Table 2) including research objectives; number of case studies; unit of analysis; data collection methods; methods of data analysis; application of reliability and validity criteria;

epistemological assumptions underlying the paper; and, the methodological literature cited by the authors.

Table 2: Case Study: Dimensions and Process

Activities of Case Study Process	Key Decisions	Dimensions	Key References
Formulating the research question/ specifying the research purpose of the study	Purpose	* Exploratory * Explanatory * Descriptive	Yin 2003
Drafting a theoretical framework for case research issues	Use of Prior Theory	* inductive/ theory building * deductive/ theory testing	Perry 1998
Defining the case – i.e. unit of analysis	Unit of Analysis	* Holistic: single unit of analysis * Embedded: multiple units of analysis within the case	Yin 2003
Choosing a set of business networks	Number of Case Studies Sampling Strategy	* Single case study * Multiple case studies * Theoretical/ purposeful sampling * Extreme or deviant case (e.g. best practice); maximum variation sampling; homogeneous sampling; critical case sampling; criterion sampling; convenience sampling	Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2003 Eisenhardt 1989 Patton, 1988
Selecting appropriate data sources	Sources of Evidence	* Qualitative case study (e.g. interviews) * Quantitative case study (e.g. surveys) * Mixed methods case study	Carson et al. 2001
Planning the access to the study of change and dynamic issues	Dimension of Time	* Longitudinal * before-after * snapshot	Yin 2003
Analysis of findings & data reduction / quality of data	Method/Process of Data Analysis Method of Verification	* Qualitative/Quantitative Content Analysis * Pattern Coding * Memoing etc * Triangulation of data, methods, investigation etc	Miles and Huberman, 1994
Writing and presenting case reports	Presentation & Discussion of Findings	* Narrative case studies * Historical cases * Emphasis on thick descriptions	Geertz, 1973; Miles and Huberman, 1994

While we started with Yin's definition of case studies, in the course of the review process, this definition had to be expanded on. In particular, we were confronted with the issue of what a case study is not, when making a decision to exclude articles from our review. Moreover, being a research team of three, we had to agree on a common set of criteria for deciding what would be labelled a case study. For instance, we excluded some articles even though their authors designated them as case studies, because they did not make a linkage to theory. As Dubois and Araujo (2004) argue, what distinguishes an account of a series of events or phenomena from a case study is that the latter is written up so that the case 'exhibits the operation of some identified theoretical principle' (p. 210). We therefore followed this distinction in our analysis, and did not include articles simply on the basis that their authors had termed them case studies.

4. Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

The findings of our review suggest that case studies are the dominant form of qualitative research in industrial marketing (see Table 3). Specifically, there were 96 qualitative articles in *IMM* and 77 case studies, including 9 mixed quantitative/qualitative case studies and 1 quantitative case study. Thus, 70% of the qualitative articles were qualitative case studies. Meanwhile, there were 10 qualitative articles in *JBBM* and 10 case studies, including one mixed qualitative/quantitative case study. Of the 10 qualitative articles, all but one was a case study. The *JBIM* published 63 qualitative papers and 58 cases including 4 mixed quantitative/qualitative cases; 2 mixed cases that combined the case study approach with an alternative qualitative method of data collection and 2 quantitative cases. Hence, 82.5% of the qualitative articles were qualitative case studies.

Table 3: Number of Qualitative Articles and Case Study Articles Examined by Year and Publication

Years	**Qual Articles**	**Case Studies**	**% cases/ articles**	**Qual Articles**	**Case Studies**	**% cases/ articles**	**Qual Articles**	**Case Studies**	**% cases/ articles**

	IMM			JBBM			JBIM		
1997	5	3	6.5%	2	1	10.1%	1	1	3.8%
1998	5	2	5.1%	1	1	5.0%	8	6	20.7%
1999	7	7	14.0%	1	1	11.1%	3	6	22.2%
2000	7	5	10.4%	0	0	0	5	4	14.3%
2001	11	8	16.0%	0	0	0	7	7	21.9%
2002	5	4	6.1%	2	2	14.3%	5	6	17.6%
2003	13	10	16.1%	0	0	0	6	3	8.6%
2004	13	13	18.3%	1	1	7.1%	6	5	13.9%
2005	11	10	13.0%	0	1	8.3%	11	11	29.7%
2006	19	15	18%	3	3	25.0%	11	9	15.1%
Total	**96**	**77**	--------	**10**	**10**	--------	**63**	**58**	--------

Table 3 distinguishes case study articles from qualitative research articles. Contrary to the assumption that case study research is synonymous with qualitative research, the evidence from Table 3 suggests otherwise. To illustrate, *JBIM* published three qualitative and six case study articles in 1999, and five qualitative and six case study articles in 2002. These findings highlight that diverse case study forms - oftentimes not solely linked to qualitative data - exist in practice. These are qualitative case studies (e.g. Ellegaard 2006; Beverland 2005), quantitative case studies (Kim and Mitchell 1999) and mixed-method case studies. The latter form of case study incorporates three alternative approaches. *First*, mixed-method studies that use separate and successive phases of research practices and methods of data collection, namely a qualitative case study that either precedes or follows a quantitative survey. For instance, Barnes, Naude and Michell (2005) conducted a three-stage study, the last of which was a qualitative comparative case study. The results of the case study were used in the findings section ‘to help in interpreting the statistical findings’ (p. 10). *Second*, mixed case studies that draw on qualitative and quantitative sources of evidence, e.g. combination of in-depth interviews, observation and a questionnaire survey, within the case study design. For example, Liu and Wang (1999), who employed the case study approach to explore channel relationship management in China, incorporated three data collection methods in the case study design, i.e. interviews with top management, questionnaire surveys of interviewees and secondary sources. *Third*, mixed qualitative case studies that blend separate qualitative research practices and methods of data collection, namely qualitative case study and in-depth interviews. This approach can be found in the research paper of Ng (2005) who conducted a two-stage study: in-depth interviews (stage 1) and qualitative case studies (stage two) in order to examine selection of e-business partners in the Australian agricultural sector. It should be noted that of the three alternative approaches of mixed case study only the third form could be characterized “qualitative”.

Common practice

The most common case study in the ten-year period across the three journals was an exploratory case study largely based on interview data. The philosophical underpinnings of the study were usually not made clear, but implicit positivism was the norm. The findings were either reported thematically, linking back to an initial conceptual framework or set of research questions; in the form of a narrative or chronology; or divided into a case description and case analysis section. There were almost equal numbers of single versus multiple case studies in each of the three journals, although there was considerable variation in terms of the number of cases included in a comparative study (it ranged between 2 and 27). However, the methodological reporting of case data was often not detailed: while it was common to mention the data collection method, the processes for analyzing and verifying the data were often not reported. Interviews were either used as the sole data source or combined with documentary or 'archival records' (although it often appeared that the term 'archival records' was mistaken for being synonymous with 'internal company documents'). There was similar confusion over the term 'exploratory', with some authors seemingly using it as a synonym for 'qualitative'.

Our review found that Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003) are the most commonly cited methodological authors. These sources have heavily influenced case study researchers since they are incorporated in single and multiple case study articles, as well as qualitative and mixed case studies. They are used in an almost ritualistic fashion, regardless of the purpose and epistemological assumptions of the paper, which appears to be problematic when it is considered that both authors are associated with positivist perspectives on case study research, which as our literature review showed has been challenged by other industrial marketing scholars (e.g. Dubois and Araujo 2004). The findings also indicate that the work of Miles and Huberman (1994), Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1992) have been frequently cited by case study researchers in terms of the analysis of qualitative data.

Best practice

As already discussed, the concept of 'best practice' raises the question of whose best practice? The authors of the case studies did make explicit or implicit reference to what they considered was best practice. For example, Brennan and Turnbull (1999), who investigated buyer-supplier dyads, discuss the need for researchers to interview both sides to a relationship; while Karlsen et al. (2003) argue a processual approach is needed when investigating firm internationalisation, given that time is central to the topic. The best practices most frequently referred to were triangulation (most often of data sources, notably the use of multiple informants, but also of theories and investigators), purposeful sampling, member checking, the use of computer-aided qualitative data analysis and systematic procedures for data analysis such as pattern matching. The acceptance of these procedures as 'best practices' is not unsurprising, given that they are recommended by the most commonly cited methodological sources.

We of course brought our own conceptions of best practice to the review, and these were additionally shaped by the process of comparing the case studies in our dataset. In particular, we judged 'best' – or at least 'good' – practice among the case studies we reviewed to consist of authors being transparent and even reflexive in their methodological reporting. This included being aware of the limitations, not just the potential advantages, of particular methodological choices. For example, Ford and McDowell (1999), while they used interviews in their study, also acknowledge that this method assumes managers think about what they do, do what they say and are free to act – which may not be the case. Importantly, best practice also entailed being faithful to one's chosen approach, which also then suited the purpose of the enquiry. One example is Beverland et al. 2006, whose paper aims at theory building and this is reflected in the methodology and reporting used: axial coding, the findings are based on a discussion of interview quotations and contextualisation of the insights generated from fieldwork. We also found many examples of researchers who had gone to considerable lengths to select appropriate cases and to include a range of informants, ensuring that multiple perspectives within the network are captured. For example, Gebauer and Frield (2005) selected 5 firms that achieved successful transition from products to services and 5 firms that were unsuccessful. Comparing case studies of successful and unsuccessful transitions processes, the authors were able to identify barriers that limit the success of transition and show how best practice firms have transformed these hurdles into success factors.

Innovative practice

Innovative practice is, of course, not necessarily a sign of best practice. However, it can be a sign of methodological skill, and some innovative designs we found were very successful in providing a fit between the data collected and the demands of the research question. One example of an innovative design can be found in Håkansson, Havila and Pedersen (1999), who conducted in-depth interviews with a main contractor and then surveyed the entire population of its main suppliers to a single project. Liu and Wang (1999) successfully amalgamated different sources of evidence within each of 4 case study firms: interviews with high and middle level management, questionnaire survey and analysis of archival records. The methods of analysis followed are within/cross case study analysis and cluster analysis. Qualitative and quantitative findings are joined together to produce a set of propositions for future research.

Some case study designs advocated in the methodological literature were only occasionally found so could be classified as innovative practice. These included what might be termed ‘non-positivist’ (e.g. critical realist or interpretive) cases, theory-testing cases and longitudinal, historical or processual cases. Non-positivist or interpretive cases were very rare – even more so because some of those professing to adhere to an interpretive approach did not follow through on the claim. An exception is Tikkanen, Alajoutsijärvi and Tahtinen (2000, p. 375), who succeed in their aim of discussing ‘how key actors interpreted the incidents’. A carefully designed theory-testing case study can be found in van de Valk and Wynstra (2005), who set out to test the transferability of an existing model: in other words, whether the model, which was developed in one industry, also applies in another. A total of 24 authors could be classified as having undertaken such time-based studies, although this also depends on how rigid a definition of longitudinal research is used. Typically, these ‘longitudinal’ or ‘processual’ studies relied on retrospective interviews, but there were a small number of real-time longitudinal studies – although this was not always easy to judge, as authors were not necessarily precise about the point at which data were collected. In six of the case studies, it appeared the authors had used extensive archival collections. The time span that was investigated varied, with the longest being the history of a network over a 100-year period (Ford and Redwood 2005).

There was limited innovation in terms of data collection and the reporting of findings. Given the dominance of interviews, attempts to go beyond this data source were few but noteworthy. In 15 case studies, the use of observational data is mentioned, however this varied considerably, ranging from factory tours to participant observation over a several-month period. One of the studies to use participant observation extensively is Nordin (2006), who was a participant observer during the implementation of an alliance. Other unusual data sources to be used were court transcripts (e.g. Vaaland 2006), photographs (Hausman 2005) and a field experiment (Higgins 1999). One study specifically positioned itself as action research (Palmer and Miller 2004). In terms of reporting, one innovative approach was to structure the findings section so it was true to a theory-building approach: the existing literature was analyzed and an initial framework presented that was then revised in the light of the empirical findings (Wynstra, Weggeman and van Weele 2003). Another innovative approach involved two levels of reporting data: the emic/insider perspective and the etic/researcher's view, which was employed by Woodside et al. (2005) in order to construe inter-firm new product development in a single case company.

5. Conclusions

In this review, we have examined how case studies have been used in the three key industrial marketing journals over a ten-year period. Our review has confirmed what has until now been the general assumption: that case studies are by far the most popular qualitative methodology among industrial marketing scholars – although perhaps what is less known is that case studies as they have been used in industrial marketing are not solely a qualitative methodology. It is also not surprising that the majority of case study authors we have reviewed over this period are affiliated with the IMP group. The IMP group dominates case research across the three major journals in industrial marketing. In this sense, our review can be seen as an intellectual history of the IMP group over the ten-year period.

Our focus in this paper has been on how case studies are practised – or at least, how practice is reported in scientific journals, since we cannot know how they were actually conducted. To our knowledge this approach – of looking at how a method is actually used – has not previously been attempted in the area of industrial marketing. We would argue that our review has given us insight into what case researchers in this field mean by ‘case study’ and what they associate with the term. In comparing the case studies in our review, we were struck by the sheer diversity of case study designs and of the different methodological choices that were made. We would argue that such diversity is positive, given that the essence of the case study approach lies in this very flexibility.

At the same time as uncovering this diversity, however, our review has also demonstrated the power of convention. We were able to identify a set of ‘common’ practices across the three journals, ‘best practices’ that authors would refer to, and various practices we labeled ‘innovative’ because they were relatively unusual. Moreover, given that we are examining the results of a publication process that also involves peer reviewers and editors, we can argue that these represent not just the standards and beliefs of individual authors, but rather of the scholarly community of industrial marketers more generally. We found that common and best practices did not necessarily coincide with the views of the methodological authorities that the case authors themselves cited, and in particular, the concerns raised in the methodological literature in industrial marketing were not necessarily reflected in the common practices we found. We would also argue that our review suggests that the conventions surrounding case research are still not well established in the field, given that many authors did not provide, or reviewers seemingly demand, basic details about their research design. As well as key details often being missing – or a methodological paragraph or section not included at all – authors struggled to explain how they had related theory to their empirical observations. Despite the fact that this is regarded as the strength of the approach, we, as a community of scholars, still have much to learn about how to theorise from case studies. Thus, while our review is limited in the sense of being a snapshot of a ten-year period, it has given us some understanding of the current state of the art of case research.

6. Reference list

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