**Capitalizing on *Tales of the field*: How to report ethnographic data in B2B research?**

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This methodological paper aims at defining what an ethnomarketing narrative is and how it can help taking into account the context of context(s) of a B2B ethnographic research. In a first part, the epistemological and methodological issues in B2B research are addressed. In a second part, the ethnomarketing narrative is presented and compared to other types of narratives to show how this style can connect to a more literary way of writing.

**Keywords**: B2B; ethnomarketing; narrative; ethnography; method; context

## Introduction and objectives

Micro social facts and rituals (Rook, 1985) are at the heart of decisions made in B2B settings. The central notion of networks of actors (Cova and Salle, 2006; 2008) emphasizes on the rites within and outside the organization and how they help build such networks (Altman and Baruch, 2010). Recent works in the B2B field adopt an anthropological approach on organization, groups and individual behavior in the industrial setting (Sihvenon *et al.*, 2011). As Möller (2013) shows, the business marketing field can be conceived of several layers that comprise: individuals, organizations, functions, management, interorganizational behaviors, institutional systems, and markets, industries, and cultures. This leads to questioning the capacity of research to depict the "complex, multilayered, and dynamic character of marketing phenomena" (Möller, 2013). Thus, the question raised in this research is the following: how can a researcher report the richness of these intertwining actors and the context of their behaviors in order to provide the reader with a thorough yet vivid interpretive frame?

Building on the works from the B2B and BtoC researches that use ethnographic approaches of the field, this paper proposes a framework to report ethnographic data in a B2B ethnomarketing narrative. This work is titled "capitalizing on Tales of the field" referring

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explicitly to Van Maanen's seminal work on organizational ethnographies (Van Maanen, 1979; 1988). This is consistent with recent works taking an anthropological approach to B2B (Rinallo and Golfetto, 2006; Visconti, 2010), and should spur new research taking into account the context of the contexts (Askegaard and Trolle-Linnet, 2011) of B2B phenomena (Cayla, Cova and Maltese, 2013).

The question of how to report the results of a B2B case study has not been fully addressed. Visconti (2010) proposes a frame for Ethnographic Case Study that embeds the reporting phase. We want to take a step further by focusing explicitly on this phase in this research. Drawing inspiration from B2C ethnographies (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989; McGrath, 1989; Hill, 1991; Schouten, 1991; Peñaloza, 1994; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Kates, 2002; Coupland, 2005), we want to present a structured method of writing the report: the ethnomarketing narrative. Capitalizing on Sihvonen *et al.*'s (2011) attempt to establish B2B case studies as collections or productions of constructed stories, this paper goes further into the making off of the B2B interpretive narrative. The purpose of this research is to provide academicians interested in building B2B ethnographies with a guideline that allows pluralist data collecting tools, thematic and chronological data analysis, and interpretive construction of the reporting narrative. To praise in favor of this position the question of the epistemological position is discussed in light of considering the context of decision making and relations in B2B interactions. The ethnomarketing narrative is then presented and discussed in regards of other types of narratives, as identified by Van Maanen (1988). Then, a structure is proposed to build the ethnomarketing narrative.

## I. Epistemological position of the ethnomarketing narrative

Business marketing theory is built from varying perspectives ranging from organizational theory, systems analysis, economics, psychology, sociology, to anthropology (Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, and Johnston, 2011; Möller, 2013).

### 1.1. B2B research epistemological and methodological plurality

Möller (2013) distinguishes five great areas of research in B2B marketing with competing epistemological and methodological approaches. The 'CRM driven relationship marketing' puts an emphasis on customer objectivist profiles and response measures. The low contextuality needed leads to a stimulus-organism-response view of theory development in this area. The 'behaviorally driven relationship marketing' has a research tradition based on the "antecedents-relationship profile-relational outcomes" (Möller, 2013, p.328) where the structural equation modeling methods are in a dominant position. The 'channel research' area takes a more context-dependent turn that allows empirical analysis of complex interplay between social norms and economic incentives as units of analysis. The field of 'Markets as networks and network-actor relationships' holds critical or transcendental realism. The aim is to understand the layered causal powers and mechanisms influencing particular historical network relationships and their events. Finally, the researchers working on 'focal network and strategic nets' consider this unit of analysis as a closed system that fosters theory-testing type of case study research designs. Where does ethnomarketing, and anthropology at large, fit among these areas of research?

### 1.2. Ethnomarketing narrative in the light of context of context

In phenomenology, intentionality, conceived as a meeting, defines for Merleau-Ponty (1945) the status of the consciousness, as well as the description of meeting circumstances defines the main object of the research. For Hegel, the road to knowledge has to make part of the acquired knowledge. So the path followed must be reproducible, otherwise the project would be stuck in contingency. The phenomenological approach considers that the lived experience appears from a given context and that certain elements of the environment become striking in the life of certain actors while they stand back in others'. It also considers that the appearances of the experience (thoughts, emotional reactions, imagination, and behaviors) are deliberate and focus on the object of experience. The phenomenological approach thus emphasizes the experience such as it is lived in a particular context (Amblard *et al.*, 1996). There are indeed two types of contexts that must be addressed in a research: the context directly linked to the phenomenon and the context linked to the research process that helped acquiring knowledge on the phenomenon.

### *1.2.1. "Interweaving" three levels of contexts within one narrative*

The understanding of the emic behavior, in which the mobilization of the context plays a determining role (Askegaard and Trolle Linnet, 2011) leads to an in-depth study of this role. Its importance is such that Dilley (1999) sees it as an "analytical tool" (Dilley, 1999, p.3). This perspective on the context as an analytical tool, refers to the vision that Geertz (1973) has on society and culture in his researches in anthropology. According to him, culture or society can be perceived as a text, which is then possible to interpret to reveal the hidden meanings.

Askegaard and Trolle Linnet (2011) propose, on the basis of Dilley's work (1999), three levels of the context that must be considered in the research. As we tried to show with the "making of" the ethnomarketing narrative, this technique has potential to interweave different levels of contexts within one coherent whole. Indeed, in an ethnomarketing narrative, the reader can identify what comes within an infra level, or mental context, with ethnographic portraits, quotations from interviews and the evolution of the main characters. This context concerns the mental connections made by a member of particular social group. At this level, we look at what an individual puts of himself in the phenomenon.

The intermediate level, or internal context, concerns the connections inside the phenomenon. At this level, we study the way members of the social group articulate their language with regard to that of the others. The situations depicted in the ethnomarketing narrative play an important part in the grasping and the understanding of this level of context. Group interactions that are given to be seen by the researcher, as well as the tangible productions, allow him/her, by interpretation, to articulate vocabulary, expressions, tropes, and a vision of the world specific to the studied group.

The highest level, or external context, articulates the domain of the phenomenon (the "utterable") and the other one, that of the world (which would be in itself unspeakable). At this level, the researcher is interested, through words, in how informants capture ideas of the surrounding world, the meaning they build upon it, and what they put back into the phenomenon under study. This level, by far the most sensitive one, appears as the least treated part in ethnographic studies. We were able to find an answer with the notion of era. It appears that if the objective is to link the uttered with the unspeakable, one way to grasp it may lay into outside sources of data. It means for the researcher to investigate beyond the phenomenon, beyond group under study. Contemporary artistic and information productions

can be taken into account in the interpretation process and be reintegrated later in the narrative.

### *1.2.1 A long tradition to be (re)discovered*

The authors of researches in ethnology (Geertz, 1973), in sociology (Latour, 2006), in management science (Wacheux, 1996; Hlady-Rispal, 2002) or more specifically in marketing (Brown, 1998; Borghini *et al.*, 2010), agree to say that the work of writing ethnography has not for objective to restore a photography of the reality, but rather to reconstitute a possible explanation of the reality (Wacheux, 1996). Geertz (1973, p. 20) specify that: "the view […] of a logical reconstruction of mere reality seems rather lame". Finally, Borghini *et al.* (2010) admit that there is always dialectic between the text and the theoretical fields of interpretation.

If the culture of a group can be understood as a literary text which presents social semantics, then its description can also take the shape of a tale (Geertz, 1973). The ethnographic description thus has the objective to show with words (Laplantine, 2006). We embrace the interpretative function of the narrative. It interprets flows of speeches stemming from a social world, even when it tries to protect the "said" despite its transformation into "written" (Geertz, 1973).

Miles and Huberman (2003) underline that there is no guide, no format to organize the qualitative report. Every researcher has to "realize artistically a structure of report that adapts to the local and intellectual context of a particular study" (Miles and Huberman, 2003, p.546). When dealing with crystallizing the ethnographical observations, the linear scientific language is not necessarily the one which suits (Sherry and Shouten, 2002). For all these reasons we praise in favor of an ethnomarketing narrative that presents along a chronological structure, the actions, feelings and thinking of main characters within the cultural context of a specific era.

## 1.3. The validity of the narrative

The textwork, as Visconti (2010) names it, is in search for viable ways to meet the double requirements contextually imposed by academic and managerial audiences. Cova and Salle (2003) observed that scholars have paid more attention to methodological soundness than to innovative ways of reporting B2B ethnographic data. Visconti (2010, p.33) calls for more "attractive, effective and thus relevant approaches to data presentation". We argue that the ethnomarketing narrative can reach such relevance while being appealing to the two targeted audience: academics and managers.

The narrative, according to Spooner (1983), must address three audiences: direct users, social and cultural systems, and scholars. Each of them will judge the quality of the narrative respectively in terms of: functionalism (the relevance of interpretations to human needs), structural functionalism (the capability of ethnographic data of strengthening social and cultural equilibria), and structuralism (the coherence between ethnographic interpretations and the former theories). On a more actionable level, Visconti (2010) draws on Kilduff's work (2006, p.253-254) in order to give researchers with criteria on evaluating a suitable report for the different targeted audiences. The criteria include novelty, brevity, meaningfulness, impersonality of the theory being generated, and respect for the interest of the targeted readers.

In this sense, the ethnomarketing narrative tries to answer the 4 following questions raised by Geertz (1973) in order to assess its validity:
- does the narrative provide convincing interpretation on context-specific perceptions and actions?
- is the narrative credible in the eyes of the target audience?
- is the narrative interesting, plausible and convincing?
- to what extent does the narrative achieve to clarify what happens in places, in unknown contexts and to solve the enigma constitued by unfamiliar acts?

## II. (Re)Introducing the ethnomarketing narrative

In this second part, we define ethnomarketing narrative within the context of the ethnomarketing method, as introduced by Badot *et al.* (2009). The ethnomarketing method follows Spiggle's steps of research design (1994). It not only includes ethnographic data collection (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), but also deals with ethnology of close and commercial phenomena. Ethnomarketing encompasses a cultural analysis of consumption and distribution phenomena and aims at an anthropological interpretation of these. It enriches Spiggle's design with a last step consisting of systematic marketing recommendations to managers.

Within any ethnographic research, the ethnographic description phase can be considered as critical. The concern is about how a consumption phenomenon can be reported without interpretation, which occurs only after exposing the facts (Spiggle, 1994). We do not agree with this assumption. Indeed, a part of interpretation lies within the exposition of facts, since observation has been made through the researcher's subjective filter and his/her iterative path in the research process (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989). So it is suggested that researchers take advantage of underlying interpretations.

The ethnomarketing narrative is the way by which data and results are presented within the ethnomarketing method. It is based on Van Maanen's typology of tales (1988) and can be considered as a new type of narratives. Next, we present the different types of tales available to a researcher and specify how the ethnomarketing narrative is different yet complementary to the other ones.

### 2.1. Choosing one among many techniques

Van Maanen (1988) distinguishes various modes of expression for the narratives which Hlady-Rispal (2002) completed with modes stemming from researches management science. This taxonomy presents the advantage to put the researcher in capacity of choice according to the mode in which he/she wishes to express himself and the objectives which he/she pursues. We present, in the following table, the synthesis of the types of narratives and their respective objectives (cf. table 2). Among the different styles available to the researchers (Van Maanen, 1979), Visconti (2010) proposes a spectrum going from a more realistic narrative, where the researcher display a higher detachment from the account he writes, to a more confessional writing type, where the researcher's emotions and intimate perceptions are preeminent. In between, the impressionist narrative is based on a warmer presentation than the former while distancing from clinical enumeration.

| Type of tale | Objectives |
|---|---|
| Quotation as milestone | Thematic, temporal et perceptual presentation using quotations. |
| Confessional | Relate the method of collection and the fallibility of the researcher in the ethnography, close to the auto-ethnography. |
| Co-written | Make the informants participate in the writing of the ethnography, them being experts of their experience. |
| Critical | Highlight the meaning of local events within economic, political and social structures in the ethnography adopting a campaigner posture. |
| Interpretive description | Present a contextual description then a diachronic and synchronic interpretation of the ethnography. |
| Ethnomarketing | The observations are presented in the form of narrative inferring gradually associated analyses and interpretations. |
| Formal | Introduce the theoretical elements such as deduced by the analysis in the ethnography. |
| Impressionist | Make relive the experience such as lived by the researcher to the reader of the ethnography. |
| Realist | Present the reality such as it showed itself to the eyes of the researcher, without modification in the ethnography. |

Table 1. Types of tales and their objective adapted from Van Maanen (1988) and Hlady-Rispal (2002)

The choice of a narrative type depends on the objective looked for in the description and in connection with the objective aimed by the investigation. When the objective consists in understanding the evolution of a phenomenon in a particular social group, the researcher can opt for the ethnomarketing narrative. Nevertheless the ethnomarketing narrative can apply to any emerging processes of consumption. This type of narrative presents the advantage to take into account the chronology of the story such as lived by the members of the observed group. Then, within the chronology, the researcher can integrate first order concepts (Van Maanen, 1979) that stem from members' interpretation. This allows following Spiggle's recommendations (1994). Finally, the researcher will use summarizing titles that advance the associated analyses and guide the reader throughout the analysis.

The one who writes has to have in mind to build a story which is "clear, compelling, fascinating, and convincing enough to capture the reader's attention" (Borghini *et al.*, 2010, p.20). The ethnomarketing narrative shows great potential into pursuing both requirements of incontestability and appeal.

When we look back in time, we learn that ethnology arose, in a long gestation, from the very literature. It arose more exactly from a "branch" of the literature, when *Description of the World* (Marco Polo, 1298), was published. So, as textual analysis, within the ethnomarketing narrative, context can reach momentum. For example, to understand better Zola's *Ladies' Paradise* (1883), it is necessary to understand the political and social contexts of France, and Paris more exactly, with all the demolitions and reconstructions of Hausmann at the time of Napoleon III. The reader could not understand the thick descriptions of the department stores or the scrupulous portrait of the Parisians and their consumption if Zola did not describe at the same time the contexts in which this behavior takes place. And within these different layers of context, the main characters evolve until "apogee". Comparing literature to marketing

research is not a daring hypothesis. One simply has to understand how scrupulous Zola was when researching about a future novel topic.

## 2.2 Writing and structuring the ethnomarketing narrative

After exposing why one can use the ethnomarketing narrative, it is now time to describe how to write and more importantly to structure such a narrative. The ethnomarketing narrative lies on a chronological skeleton and takes shape in situations or episodes faced by individuals, groups and at a larger scale a society.

The chronological structure of the narrative is built according to four types of dates and periods. First the dates and periods supplied by informants are used to redraw the story of the experience they live(d). These dates compose the spine of the narrative. Then, the dates of group interactions (as observation, participant or not, sessions) are used, within the story, to describe how representations and practices mix. These specific moments help also better understand the links between one's speech during an interview and his/her behaviors. They are the organs of the narrative. Two other types of dates complete the body of the narrative. Any tangible creation (documents, home-made objects, etc.) has a date of creation or distribution to the public; they can be used as proofs or outcome of an experience. Last but not least, dates and periods that help better understand an era can also be introduced into the narrative. These can be found in newspapers, essays, contemporary novels, shows and TV shows, songs that the researcher discovers during field presence.

The narrative is then edited in periods that contain the dates listed before. They are entitled so as to transcribe the meaning of the period within the process. Each period is constituted of situations. These situations are described in a dense way thanks to the various sources of data collected. The periods which punctuate the narrative are not representative of the number of events listed within the totality of the data, but they are representative of their influence in the outcome of the intrigue as seen by its protagonists.

As for any narrative, there are protagonists. It is all about informants. All informants have not the same role in a research, as in a novel. There are those on whom the researcher is going to base his/her analysis to determine the main themes, and there are those who allow to confirm or to confront a followed track. There are thus two groups that distinguish from one another: the main characters (for example, the privileged informant: Whyte, 1955) and the minor characters. Their role and their evolution in the story reflect what they brought to the researcher. So, beyond the social context in which the story evolves, the role and the evolution of the characters give to see the process of the research.

The narrative is not constituted of only dates listed from the data. In respect of reality representativeness criterion, the researcher can use various modes of representation to answer the objectives of the narrative (Borghini *et al.*, 2010). So, maps, screen shots, and other graphic representations produced by the studied group help illustrating both context and described situations. Quotations and narratives of the protagonists intertwine and are combined in the story. Finally, tables and figures realized by the researcher during field presence and during the analysis can be used to illustrate and help understanding the interpretation.

About the global process, data analysis can be qualified as thematic analysis (Bardin, 1977). It first separates operational from presentational data (Van Maanen, 1979), and then it groups

elements in categories of sense. After listing all the chronological elements in order to embrace a longitudinal presentation of data, a time away from data can be necessary to favor the interpretive incubation (Spiggle, 1994). Finally, the various sources of data are gathered to constitute the ethnomarketing narrative, which follows the structure of the interpretive scheme. The ethnomarketing narrative uses summarizing titles that infer gradually the associated analyses. The introduction of the narrative can be constituted by ethnographic portraits of the protagonists. They aim at giving biographic, situational elements and, protagonists' representations on what they lived, such as interpreted by the researcher (Heinich, 1999).

## Conclusion

This work tried to praise in favor of more stories told in ethnographic researches, using what was introduced as the "ethnomarketing narrative". The review of ten ethnographic articles showed that room is available for this type of result presentation, one that tells the reader a story. Then the ethnomarketing narrative was put into perspective with other kinds of narratives as defined by Van Maanen (1988) and a method to build such a narrative was proposed. In a last part, a discussion was initiated to assess the capacity of such a result presentation to take into account the context of the context. In a concluding remark, some contributions, limits and future steps are presented.

### *Main contributions*

In the ethnomarketing narrative, any means can be used to make the story more vivid. As the example of Holt (2002) shows, different techniques take the reader into another world, the informant's world: interview excerpts, quotations, short but colorful descriptions of physical appearance, place, feelings experienced by the researcher but also shown by the interviewee. The ethnomarketing narrative helps moving toward a more novelist way of presenting the results of ethnographic studies, following the path of the literary realism that began in France in the nineteenth century.

The chronological aspect is important in the ethnomarketing narrative. On a theoretical level, it helps the reader contextualize the research and informants' points of view or behaviors at a given time. It brings hints to better understand how the interpretation was built and upon which empirical basis. It also facilitates the implementation of future researches. New researches led on a similar subject can better take into consideration the context of previous interpretations and add specific insights based on the replica of a design at a different time.

Last but not least, the ethnomarketing narrative appears to put up front two kinds of contexts in a single act of writing. As promoted by Askegaard and Trolle Linnet (2011), three levels of contexts can interlock in such a narrative: the infra, intermediate and external levels that need to be unraveled in a phenomenon. As questioned by Brown (1998) and proposed by Latour (2006), this type of narrative can be a tool for the researcher to show through the story of his informants his research story.

### *Limits*

For now, the main limit that must be addressed lies in the nature of data collected. It appears that collecting data within the context of case studies provide exceptional material to tell a story. Individual's narrative is also a technique that can be privileged to build coherent and

convergent stories. However in B2B research several individuals or groups are interviewed and observed, and these are usually not linked to one another, they barely know the existence of other individuals or groups approached. So, how one can write a convergent story of very different timelines? A possible answer would be to take a step back and get an overview at the situations, still bearing the risk of falling into the historical method.

Another limit lays in the length of articles in journals. It appears to be difficult to write an in-depth story with its rules of making a character grow its temper, or progressing through an action, in a 15 to 20 pages format. The example of Holt (2002) can be of guidance. He chose to present two portraits exemplifying consumer resistance toward branding. The two portraits he presented represent one third of the total paper (6 pages out of 20). This shows that a narrative can be short, vivid and proof-building.

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