

GROUNDING THEORY STUDIES IN INDUSTRIAL MARKETING: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Abstract

Industrial marketing research has traditionally employed qualitative case studies, while relatively less is known about the application of grounded theory, despite its potential and suitability to industrial marketing. This study conducts a systematic review of grounded theory in industrial marketing that are published in five marketing journals. The findings provide an overview of the published grounded theory studies in industrial marketing research, and illustrate the state-of-the-art of the applications of grounded theory methods in industrial marketing. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate the difference between methodological guidelines of grounded theory and their practical application, thus offering advice for researchers on how to improve grounded theory studies in the future.

Keywords: Grounded theory, industrial marketing, systematic review, qualitative research

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Introduction

Qualitative research has a prominent position in industrial marketing research, where scholars have both traditionally and extensively employed case study methods to build new theories (Easton, 2010; Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2010). Case studies are usually considered highly suitable for industrial marketing research, as they provide the tools for capturing and explaining the dynamic interactions and behaviors of actors that occur over time in a specific, real-life context (Woodside & Wilson, 2003; Borghini, Carù, & Cova 2010; Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012). However, while case study is typically considered as the “methodology of choice” for industrial marketing studies (Dubois & Araujo, 2004, p. 207), grounded theory has emerged as a fruitful alternative, evidenced as the choice of research method for the few qualitative articles that have been published in the leading marketing journals (e.g. Tuli et al., 2007; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011; Coviello & Joseph, 2012).

Grounded theory is a powerful research method, which emphasizes inductive theory building from naturally occurring field data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It seeks to generate novel understanding about the patterns of interactions among social actors in their real-life context, and develop theories that explain how these interactions construct reality for the actors in their natural settings by “grounding” them in the empirical observations (Gioia, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory is considered especially useful in discovering rich insights from social interactions and “developing context-based, process-oriented descriptions and explanations” of complex managerial processes in a specific real-life settings, as it allows the researcher to delve deep into the “lived experience and incidents of the management world” (Fendt & Sachs, 2008, p. 19; Urquhart, Lehmann, & Myers, 2010, p. 258).

The characteristics of grounded theory make it specifically suited to examine key issues in industrial marketing, such as complex decision-making processes and interactions in relationships and social networks, as they require often deep analysis of the empirical data from a real-life setting (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As such, grounded theory offers “valuable research possibilities for industrial marketing research” (Wagner, Lukassen, & Mahlendorf, 2010), and prior studies have made several calls to emphasize the potential of grounded theory as a fruitful method for industrial marketing studies, (e.g. Partington, 2000; Locke, 2001; Geiger & Turley, 2003; Gummesson, 2003).

However, while grounded theory is widely applicable to marketing and management research in general, and industrial marketing in particular, it is often employed insufficiently, and sometimes even misused completely (Wagner et al., 2010). It seems that despite its research potential, the true nature of the grounded theory approach remains little understood (Partington, 2000). Consequently, grounded theory is considered a risky research venture, and more understanding on how to apply it in practice is needed (Suddaby, 2006).

To address this issue, this paper examines the use of grounded theory in industrial marketing research by conducting a systematic review of grounded theory studies published in five marketing journals to date (i.e. by the end of 2013). More specifically, similar to Piekkari et al. (2010) analysis of “good” case research practices in industrial marketing, this study examines how grounded theory has been applied in industrial marketing research in practice, compared

to the methodological recommendations found in the literature. This approach could be helpful in closing the “growing gap between those who actually engage in grounded theory and those who write about it” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 638). Furthermore, by analysing the practical applications of grounded theory in published journal articles, this study complements Wagner et al. (2010) who analysed grounded theory’s suitability to industrial marketing research based on methodological criteria for qualitative research.

Overall, this study makes three key contributions. First, it provides a detailed overview of the published grounded theory studies in industrial marketing research. Second, it describes the state-of-the-art of the applications of grounded theory methods in industrial marketing. Finally, it provides important implications for researchers on how to improve the application of grounded theory methods in the future research.

Grounded theory in literature vs. criticism on application in practice

While grounded theory originates from sociology and symbolic interactionism (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) it has been steadily entering the marketing and management domain and gaining acceptance as a recognized, credible and rigorous research method (e.g. Corley & Gioia, 2004; Epp & Price, 2011). Given that grounded theory is “paradigmatically neutral” it is applicable to a wide range of studies (Glaser, 2001) and accordingly, employed in many fields of research including consumer behaviour (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry 1989; Fournier, 1998), services marketing (Brady, Voorhees & Brusco, 2012), strategic management (Orlikowski, 1993; Plowman et al., 2007), supply chain management (Mello & Flint, 2009; Randall & Mello; 2012) and managerial decision-making (Eisenhardt, 1989; Maitlis, 2005).

The central premise of grounded theory is to develop an emerging theory about an under-researched phenomenon through a research process that emphasizes discovery from empirical field data and avoids theoretical frameworks and preconceived hypotheses from prior literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Shah & Corley, 2006). In contrast to traditional case study approach which is considered a relatively linear research process (e.g. Piekkari et al. 2010), grounded theory is a highly iterative research process, which is guided by the insights that emerge from the accumulated field data (Martin & Turner, 1986). The emergent design is one of the hallmarks of grounded theory, and it allows the researcher to adjust the research process based on early findings, interpret complex phenomena from the best viewpoint possible, and capture a holistic account of interactions and their consequences in a social setting (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; O’Reilly et al., 2012).

While the emergent design allows a significant degree of freedom in examining the focal phenomena because it is not limited to a pre-determined theoretical ideas, it involves a very detailed, rigorous and systematic application of the key practices, or the core analytical tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Reilly et al., 2012). These analytical guidelines, including the constant comparison between data, theoretical coding, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and theoretical sensitivity, are all at heart of grounded theory methodology, and employed in non-linear, yet iterative manner during the research process to facilitate the discovery of the theory from the empirical data (Glaser, 2001; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The core analytical tenets are summarized in Table 1, and explained in more detail in the findings section, where they are compared to the actual practices displayed by the published grounded theory studies in industrial marketing research.

Table 1. The core analytical tenets of grounded theory.

Core analytical tenet	Main purpose (in brief)	Typical practices
Constant comparison	To discover emerging findings that will guide the ongoing research process and theory development	Use of memos, within and cross-case analysis
Theoretical coding	To deconstruct data into meaningful incidents, categorize incidents with similar properties, and integrate emerging categories into a higher-order core category to form a theory	Open, axial, and selective coding
Theoretical sampling	To guide the data collection process to find the most relevant sources of empirical data	Conceptual ideas, analytical thinking, and emerging findings
Theoretical saturation	To signal of the completeness of the data and verification of the developed theory	Extensive data, informant feedback
Theoretical sensitivity	To recognise the relevant elements of an emerging theory from the noise in the data	Conceptual and contextual pre-understanding, research experience

However, although the core analytical tenets are considered critical and necessary in developing grounded theory, they are rarely employed in a holistic manner, or as an overarching research methodology (O'Reilly et al., 2012). In contrast, many authors tend to treat grounded theory mainly as a way to code the data (Urquhart et al., 2010), while neglecting to employ the core analytical tenets of grounded theory, and in turn, adequately explain how they were applied to produce findings and generate new theory (Martin & Turner, 1986; Hallier & Forbes, 2004).

Given that the major difference between grounded theory and other qualitative research methods is the strong focus on theory development, the analytical tenets play a key role in moving from description of the focal phenomenon to the actual theory construction (Mello & Flint, 2009). However, far too often authors fail to sufficiently address the analytical tenets of grounded theory, "thus limiting the practical relevance and theory-building capabilities of the method" (O'Reilly et al., 2012, p. 10). Hence in reality, the lack of detailed application of the key practices of grounded theory leads to superficial findings, underdeveloped theories, and ultimately, to rejected manuscripts (Gephart 2004; Suddaby, 2006).

Research method

To identify grounded theory studies that have been conducted in the industrial marketing context, we employed a systematic literature review (e.g. Denyer & Tranfield, 2006; Cooper, 2010). Specifically, based on quality and impact, we selected three journals that specialize in business-to-business or industrial marketing (Industrial Marketing Management [IMM], Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing [JBBM], and Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing [JBIM]), and two¹ journals that focus on general marketing, but publish also studies conducted in the industrial marketing context (Journal of Marketing [JM], and Journal of the Academy of the Marketing Science [JAMS]).

We focused on grounded theory studies that have been published in the aforementioned journals by the end of 2013. This timeframe provides both sufficient breadth of the past studies, and a state-of-the-art of the applications of grounded theory methods in more recent studies. In

¹ Initially, Journal of Business Research was included in the journal sample as a third general marketing journal. However, as we reviewed the identified grounded theory studies from this journal, we noticed that a clear majority of them focused solely on consumer marketing. Hence, we excluded the journal from this review.

practice, we conducted a database search by using Elsevier (IMM) and Ebsco (JM), and employing keywords “grounded theory”² and the corresponding journal name, or a database search at the journal’s own article archives (JBBM, JBIM, JAMS) by using the same keywords.

The initial search process resulted in the identification of 254 different articles. To ensure the relevancy of the identified articles, we read them carefully through and employed the following inclusion criteria. First, we included only those articles which explicitly stated employing either grounded theory or discovery-oriented research approach as the primary research method. Consequently, we rejected articles that mentioned grounded theory only in relation to specific areas of the research approach, such as data collection, analysis or coding (e.g. Viswanathan et al., 2005; Cronin et al., 2011; Friend & Johnson, 2013), combined grounded theory approach with phenomenology or ethnography (e.g. Deberry-Spence, 2008; Decrop & Derbais, 2010; Speakman & Ryals, 2012), or employed mixed method approach (e.g. Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Steward et al. 2010).

Second, following Suddaby (2006), we checked that the articles that passed the first criteria did not make only “cursory citations” to grounded theory, but actually described how the core analytic tenets of grounded theory were applied in the research process. Thus, the selected articles had to both explicitly state the use of grounded theory, and also (explicitly or implicitly) display the use of grounded theory in practice. Of all the identified articles with keyword search, 21 fulfilled the aforementioned qualification criteria. However, we excluded one further article which focused on consumer markets³ (Beverland et al. 2010). In addition, we read through the methodology sections of the 20 qualified articles to find potential references to other grounded theory studies that the database search might have neglected. Based on this procedure, we identified one additional article (Tuli et al., 2007) fitting the inclusion criteria. Thus, the search process resulted in the identification of 21 articles that employ grounded theory in industrial marketing research (see Appendix 1). The number of identified articles per journal is depicted in the Table 2.

Table 2. Identified grounded theory studies by journal.

Journal <i>(Impact factor)</i>	Total articles published by the end of 2013	Initial hits with keyword search	Articles employing grounded theory
IMM (1,933)	2094 (1971-2013)	128 (1975-2013)	8
JBBM (0,440)	372 (1992-2013)	10 (1995-2012)	0
JBIM (1,000)	1136 (1986-2013)	52 (1998-2013)	4
JM (3,368)	9722 (1936-2013)	37 (1957-2013)	6
JAMS (2,570)	1705 (1978-2013)	27 (1994-2013)	3
Total	15029	254	21

Description of the review articles

Based on the initial hits with keyword search, grounded theory is still a relatively rarely used research method in industrial marketing research. Furthermore, it seems that the traditions in

² We believe that using “grounded theory” as a single combination is a sufficient keyword, because it will provide hits to articles that refer to grounded theory directly in the actual text, or refer to grounded theory indirectly in the actual text, but cite and mention either the original Glaserian (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or more recent Straussian (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) source material in their reference sections.

³ Also Epp & Price (2011) study was conducted in consumer markets but they argue that the similar kind of setting would be possible also with companies.

the journals, such as favouring quantitative methods might influence the publication of grounded theory articles as there are differences between the journals in the amount of published grounded theory articles. For example, both IMM and JBIM produced more keyword hits in the initial search than JM, compared to the amount of total articles published. However, the likely explanation is that JM published several issues already before grounded theory was introduced.

The analysed 21 articles have been published between years 1998-2013. However, a majority of articles have been published during the last four years (see Figure 1). Despite that the original book of grounded theory was published already 1967 (by Glaser and Strauss), the review shows that grounded theory as a research method in the industrial marketing field has become more general only during the last two decades. The publication of grounded theory studies has been relatively irregular, but the trend seems to be increasing during the last 15 years. It must be noted that the article databases include more articles from the recent years, but it is likely that the review has captured the real trend as no articles was found before 1998. One explanation for the increase of grounded theory studies might be the publications of several books that explain the grounded theory methodology in more detail. These books also take a more practice-oriented perspective for the method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

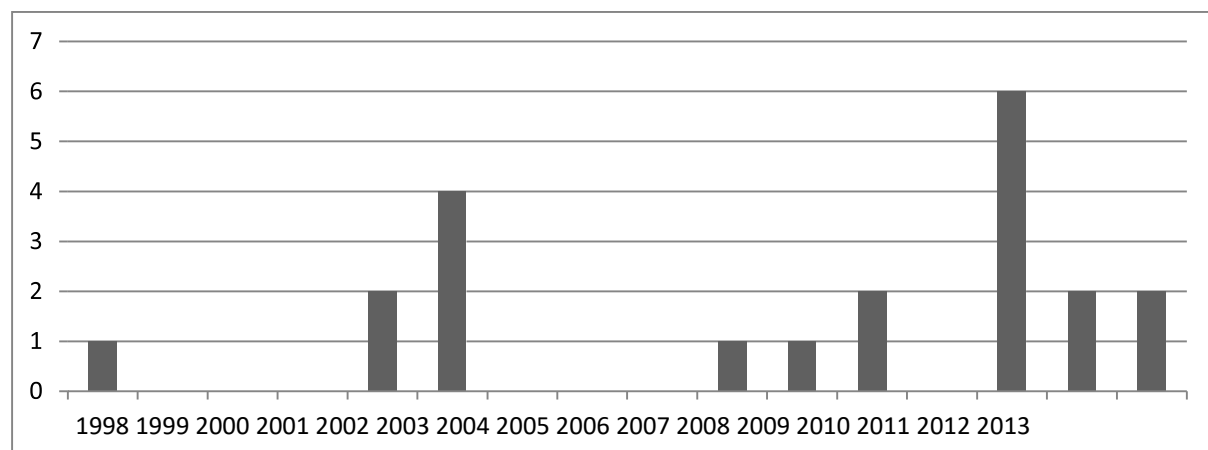


Figure 1. Grounded theory studies by year

Altogether 42 different authors have contributed to the reviewed articles which suggests that the method is already used by many authors. Only four authors have contributed to more than one article and only one person has authored three articles (Ulaga, 2003; 2011; 2012). Interestingly, almost all articles (19) have more than one author. However, only few articles stated that more than one author was contributing to the coding process even though the use of research triangulation in the identification of codes appearing in the data would increase the research reliability.

Interviews were the main method for collecting data in the reviewed articles. All but two articles stated explicitly that they used interviews for data collection. Two of these articles (Geiger & Turley, 2003; Lee & Cadogan, 2009) used also observation and two articles obtained focus groups (Malshe & Sohi, 2009; Tuli et al. 2007) to support their analysis. The number of interviewed people varied from ten (Ulaga, 2003) to 104 (Tuli et al., 2007). The two remaining articles collected the data through secondary sources, such as documents, annual reports and web sites (Closs, Speier & Meacham, 2011; Gilliland, 2003).

Findings: Grounded theory in practice

Analysis of the articles completed by the time of conference

Conclusions

In this study, we have analysed the use of grounded theory in industrial marketing research in five marketing journals. Our review shows that although grounded theory is still rarely used, the amount of grounded theory studies have increased during the last 15 years. This study identifies the state-of-the art practices of grounded theory in industrial markets and suggests ways to improve the use of the method. Overall, based on the preliminary findings, this study makes four contributions to the industrial marketing literature as well as the methodological literature related to the grounded theory.

First, this study identifies 21 articles in the industrial marketing field that are using grounded theory. This helps scholars to understand the broad applicability that grounded theory has, and provides examples on how grounded theory has been used in practice. Second, the study demonstrates how grounded theory should be conducted according to the literature and compares the methodological recommendations to the current research practice. Third, this study suggests that the quality and of grounded theory articles could be improved by both focusing on and explaining the use of core analytical tenets of grounded theory during the research process. Finally, this study illustrates the difference between grounded theory studies in journals with different impact factors. Or in other words, how much grounded theory is needed to publish in the leading marketing journals?

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APPENDIX 1: Review articles

Journal	Year	Authors	Title	Sample/Data	Research Outcome
IMM	2013	Keränen & Jalkala	Towards a framework of customer value assessment in B2B markets: An exploratory study	Interviews with 18 managers from three firms providing integrated solutions in business markets	Process-based framework for customer value assessment that comprises five key processes and 11 related activities.
IMM	2013	Bhalla & Terjesen	Cannot make do without you: Outsourcing by knowledge-intensive new firms in supplier networks	Interviews with 15 managers from ten start-up firms operating in biotechnology industry and 25 managers from 20 of their supplier firms	Identification of the different modes of outsourcing in supplier networks for new firms operating in knowledge-intensive industries and critical outsourcing capabilities for realizing the benefits or outsourcing Propositions about the benefits and costs that new firms may realize by outsourcing in supplier networks
IMM	2012	Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga	'It's almost like taking the sales out of selling'—Towards a conceptualization of value-based selling in business markets	Interviews with 11 sales managers from 11 different firms operating in business markets	Conceptualization of value-based selling as a three dimensional sales approach in business makers and potential outcomes of value-based selling
IMM	2011	Thomas, Esper & Stank	Coping with time pressure in interfirm supply chain relationships	Interviews with 24 managers from 24 different firms operating in a variety of industrial contexts	A taxonomy of time pressure coping strategies that are driven by the frequency, magnitude, and attribution of time pressure
IMM	2009	Lee & Cadogan	Sales force social exchange in problem resolution situations	Observational pre-study with two regional offices of a small sales firm. Interviews with 19 sales managers and salespeople from 13 B2B firms.	Theoretical model of a problem resolution wheel including the drivers, resources, and outcomes of social exchange processes in problem resolution situations
IMM	2003	Ulaga	Capturing value creation in business relationships: A customer perspective	Interviews with ten professional purchasers from nine industrial firms	Identification eight value drivers in supplier-customers relationships
IMM	2003	Gilliland	Toward a business-to-business channel incentives classification scheme	Rating profiles on 59 different supplier channel programs in the high technology market (from a trade publication focusing on channel topics)	Classification of business-to-business channel incentives into five major categories and 16 sub-categories, and their influence on controlling reseller behaviors and potential conditions of implementing the incentives
IMM	2003	Flint & Woodruff	The initiators of changes in customers' desired value	Interviews with 22 purchasing professionals in 9 manufacturing firms in auto industry	Theoretical model of the initiators of changes in customers' desired value, including tensions related to the customer, the environment, and the customer's capabilities
JBIM	2011	Pullings, Mallin, Buehrer, & Jones	How salespeople deal with intergenerational relationship selling	Interviews with 24 semi-structured interviews with salespeople	Identification of five distinct social creativity identity management strategies that Millennial salespeople use to overcome their disadvantaged out-group status.
JBIM	2011	Malshe	An exploration of key connections within sales marketing interface	Interviews with 25 sales and 22 marketing professionals in business-to-business firms in the pharmaceutical, telecom, IT, industrial	Identification of the contextual factors that may affect the sales-marketing interface, and two new linkages (social and philosophical) that can strengthen the connection between sales and marketing

				products, healthcare, and engineering industries	Propositions about how the contextual factors and linkages may influence the connection between sales and marketing interface
JBIM	2003	Geiger & Turley	Grounded theory in sales research: an investigation of salespeople's client relationships	interviews with 36 salespeople and 5 days of observational data from sales calls in the field and sales meetings	Categorization of personal relationships (i.e. business only, cultivated, and untainted) between salespeople and clients, and antecedent and mediating variables (i.e. industry type, personality factors and knowledge development) that influence a specific type of relationship
JM	2012	Coviello & Joseph	Creating major innovations with customers: insights from small and young technology firms	27 interviews with ten informants from six small and young technology firms operating in business-to-business markets	Taxonomy of new product development activities and customer roles in major innovation (MI), and identification of three capabilities relevant to the development of successful MI. Propositions about customers' participation in MI
JM	2011	Epp & Price	Designing solutions around customer network identity goals	Interviews with 88 members from 21 families	Identification of four customer network integration processes, a typology of network goals that motivate network choices, and four approaches to manage multiple identity goals. Propositions about how goal management approaches are formulated in response to structure and character synergy/ discord among customer network goals.
JM	2011	Ulaga & Reinartz	Hybrid offerings: How manufacturing firms combine goods and services successfully	Two pilot studies with 13 managers from two industrial manufacturers. Interviews with key decision makers in 22 manufacturing companies.	A framework of four critical resources and five critical capabilities for deploying hybrid offerings in business markets A typology of industrial services and propositions about how specific resources and capabilities affect manufacturers' positional advantage in two directions: differentiation and cost leadership
JM	2007	Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj	Rethinking customer solutions: from product bundles to relational processes	Interviews with 49 managers in customer firms and 55 managers in supplier firms and two focus groups with 21 managers from 19 supplier firms in several industries	A process-based framework of customer solutions as a set of four relational processes (customer requirements definition, customization and integration, deployment, and post-deployment support). Propositions about the supplier and customer variables that influence the effectiveness of a solution.
JM	2002	Flint, Woodruff, & Gardial	Exploring the phenomenon of customers' desired value change in a business-to-business context	Interviews with 22 key-decision makers in nine manufacturing organizations in automotive industry.	Identification of the customers' desired value change (CDVC) as a complex phenomenon which encompasses three interrelated subphenomena: CDVC form/intensity, tension management, and action/interaction strategies, and two sets (external/internal) of contextual conditions that are linked to CDVC. Proposition of a causal model of CDVC about how the contextual conditions, CDVC form/intensity, and tension management may lead to different action/interaction strategies
JM	2002	Bendapudi & Leone	Managing business-to-business customer relationships following key	Study 1: Six focus groups with a total of 72 respondents from business-to-business industries.	Identification of the value that customers place in their relationships with key contact employees, customers' concerns when a key contact employee is no longer available, and what vendor firms can do to alleviate these concerns and retain employee knowledge

			contact employee turnover in a vendor firm	Study 2: Interviews with 47 managers from 16 firms including suppliers and customers, a qualitative survey including 83 managers for 34 firms.	Propositions about the customers' reactions when faced with key contact employee turnover, the strategies to address customer concerns, and the strategies to retain key contact employee knowledge
JM	1998	Gilly & Wolfenbarger	Advertising's internal audience	Interviews with 19 advertising decision makers and 17 group interviews with a total of 151 employees	Conceptual model of employee evaluation of advertising that includes three dimensions (accuracy, value congruence, and effectiveness), and potential outcomes (role conflict, organizational pride, identification, and commitment), and explains the gaps between employees and decision makers' values and views of advertising. Propositions about how advertisements induce employee evaluations
JAMS	2011	Closs, Speier, & Meacham	Sustainability to support end-to-end value chains: the role of supply chain management	Documents, annual reports, firm web sites and internet based web searches from large, global firms in the food, pharmaceutical, electronics, and retail industries.	A framework that defines the dimensions of sustainability and the categories of initiatives within each dimension.
JAMS	2009	Malshe & Sohi	What makes strategy making across the sales-marketing interface more successful?	Interviews with 58 sales and marketing professionals from engineering, pharmaceuticals, IT and Telecom industries and a focus group with 11 marketing professionals from a financial industry.	A three-stage process-based framework for marketing strategy making within the sales-marketing interface, that explicates the specific activities at each stage, the sequence in which these activities may unfold, and the role sales and marketing functions may play in the entire process.
JAMS	2008	Blazevic & Liebens	Managing innovation through customer coproduced knowledge in electronic services: An exploratory study	Interviews with a total of 42 key informants including managers, engineers, and customers from three electronic service interaction channels	Identification of three different roles of customers in knowledge coproduction (passive user, active informer and bidirectional creator) and each role's impact on various innovation tasks