

Magdalena Rzemieniak

Politechnika Lubelska  
Wydział Zarządzania  
e-mail: m.rzemieniak@pollub.pl

## Ethnographic methods – a case study of gaining knowledge about consumers

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**Summary.** This study presents the process of changes in consumer behaviour taking place over the last few years related to being active and leading a healthy lifestyle. The objective of the paper is to characterize, analyze and evaluate the motivation of people leading a healthy lifestyle, i.e. those who practice sports and keep a healthy diet. The thesis of the study is that consumers practice sports mainly for entertainment and enjoyment, wishing to stay healthy and fit and maintain a proper body shape. The thesis was verified by carrying out experimental pilot ethnographic qualitative research involving participatory observation. The measurement instrument used was shadowing. The thesis was verified based on the analysis and evaluation of the current and available secondary data on consumer behaviour changes related to being active and leading a healthy lifestyle.

### Introduction

Ethnography is a very flexible and creative domain which provides an opportunity to perform qualitative research in a non-standard and unconventional way. The advantage of ethnographic methods is the ability to observe the elements which the subjects themselves are not always aware of but which have a considerable impact on their buying decisions. One of the most interesting techniques of the

aforementioned research method is shadowing. It is based on observations: passive, active, implicit and explicit. The author visited a number of fitness clubs according to a pre-arranged plan to observe their customers, to measure the time they spent there, observe what they bought, which equipment they used, how they behaved after their training sessions, and what they ate during or after the activities. The research was based on active observation, which permitted interaction without disclosing the identity of the researcher, who presented herself as a regular customer. This method made contacts with consumers completely natural. Shadowing is a technique used in exploratory research to answer such questions as who the customer is, how he/she relates to a product or service, how he/she behaves in a shop, and to what extent his/her decisions are influenced by the personnel, e.g. reception desk staff, etc.

### **Definitional basis of the notions of consumer and consumer behaviour**

According to the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection consumer is „a natural person entering into a legal transaction with an entrepreneur not directly related with his/her business or professional activity” (Krzakiewicz, Cyfert, 2016, p. 49); for instance, if Mr Kowalski buys a laptop for his child, he is considered a consumer, and when he buys the same device for his company and lets his child use it from time to time, he is not regarded as such (Skowron, 2013, p. 67). The status of a consumer is crucial from the legal perspective, as it often determines which regulations apply when a given transaction is evaluated. It should be pointed out that in many cases the legal situation of a consumer is authoritatively protected by relevant regulations (Skowron, Gąsior, 2017, p. 13; Maciaszczyk, 2014, p. 67). Marketing specialists have a broader perspective on the definition of „consumer”. Consumer is everyone who shows a consumption need, and purchases a given product/service to meet his/her pre-existing need. It is worth emphasizing the difference between consumers, purchasers and users. A purchaser is a person who does not necessarily make the purchase in order to meet his/her own consumer needs. A user is distinguished by the fact that using a given product or service does not have to be correlated with choosing or purchasing it. The term „consumer” is thus not equivalent with „purchaser” and is a broader notion than „user”. Consumers, apart from using, also perform other activities: make decisions, make purchases, dispose of used goods, etc. (Kotler, 2012, p. 78). In turn, not every purchaser is a consumer: a purchaser is, for instance, a community nurse buying food for her patients, who does not meet her own needs through the purchase (Stańczyk-Hugier, 2011, p. 162). A consumer is thus the final user of a product and, being the one who acts, can do so „individually or in groups (representing his/her household)” (Kieźel, 2010, p. 45).

As a result of the constant changes in circumstances observed in Poland and abroad, enterprises compete for the attention and favor of consumers. „A change in the orientation of enterprises’ operations leads to the increasing importance of consumers and focusing all activities on ensuring their maximum satisfaction” (Rosa, Perenc, 2011, p. 7). Prof. Leszek Rudnicki defines the consumer as „the king of the economic system”, justifying his claim by stating that the success of manufacturing and sales companies largely depends on consumers (Rudnicki, 2012, p. 92; Skowron, 2013, p. 92).

### **Research methodology**

Experimental pilot research was carried out using the participatory observation method and the shadowing technique. The participatory observation method is part of qualitative ethnographic research. It is a very flexible and creative domain which provides an opportunity to perform qualitative research in a non-standard and unconventional way. As stated by Julia Izmałkova, the owner of a company dealing solely with this type of research, „the number of techniques which can be used is practically unlimited. Therefore, in each case we tailor the research design to the needs of the client, the given category and the studied issue” (Sopińska, Mierzejewska, 2017, p. 102). The assumption of ethnographic research is to be as close as possible to the natural (real) context (environment/situation) (Rzemieniak, 2013, p. 99). The specific feature of ethnographic research is that this is the researcher who approaches the consumers and, instead of asking questions, tries to listen to them; most often the observed person is not aware that he/she takes part in a study. It is important to perform the research in the place where the consumer buys products or services and uses them. When a consumer is asked what he or she thinks about a given issue, he/she usually provides answers which, in his or her opinion, are expected by the researcher. Social acceptance is a factor which heavily influences such situations (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2016, p. 170; Sopińska, Mierzejewska, 2017). The advantage of ethnographic methods is the ability to make observations of elements which the subjects themselves are not always aware of but which have a considerable impact on their purchasing decisions. Therefore, it seems justified to use various anthropological and psychological techniques. One of the most interesting techniques of the aforementioned research method is shadowing, which was used for the purposes of the present study. It is based on observations: passive, active, implicit and explicit. The author visited fitness clubs based on a pre-arranged plan to observe their customers, to measure the time they spent there, observe what they drank during the session, which equipment they used, how they

behaved after their training sessions, etc. The technique of active observation was employed, enabling the researcher to interact with the subjects and ask them specific questions about why, how and for what purpose they did specific things, without disclosing her identity). The researcher acted as a regular customer. This method made contacts with consumers completely natural. Shadowing is a technique used in exploratory research to answer such questions as who the customer is, how he/she relates to a product or service, how he/she behaves in a shop, and to what extent his/her decisions are influenced by the personnel, e.g. reception desk staff, etc. The time which the „shadow” spends with a consumer depends on how thoroughly the research problem needs to be examined.

### **Analysis and assessment of research results**

The research scenario was in all cases identical and reproducible, and consisted of observing a customer (subject) from the moment of entering the fitness club to the apparently random conversation focusing on such aspects as motivation, the goal of exercising, training methods and time spent on physical activity during the week. Other information which the author attempted to obtain was the involvement of a given individual, whether his/her presence at the gym was a result of his/her lifestyle and a general philosophy of caring for one's health or a necessity which is not enjoyable and does not bring satisfaction.

The research was based on the following scenario:

- the researcher's role was to act as an active gym-goer,
- in the first stage the author did not talk to the respondent but observed him/her,
- after that the researcher made contact and, as far as possible, tried to obtain information relevant for the research process,
- on the basis of a previously prepared research sheet, the author gathered information based on observations and conversations taking place in the respondent's natural environment.

The research ended with the completion of the sheet, on the basis of which the customer's profile was analyzed.

### **Conclusions**

Due to the abundance of secondary data from sample quantitative research presenting changes in consumer behaviour related to health and sporting activity, the author decided to conduct experimental pilot qualitative research using the method

gaining in popularity even among large enterprises. The advantage of shadowing over surveys is the possibility of observing the emerging changes and new trends or finding motivation for verifying a tendency visible in a small group on a larger population. The description based on the observations makes it possible to analyze the presented information. Furthermore, the method shows consumer behaviour in a very detailed way, which undoubtedly can be a source of untypical observations.

The objective of the article was achieved, and the above described research confirms the thesis that the main reason for practicing sports is entertainment and enjoyment, keeping fit and maintaining a proper body shape. Healthy diet observed by consumers is in line with the growing trend for health and sporting activity, including keeping an appropriate body weight.

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**Metody etnograficzne – studium przypadku zdobywania wiedzy o konsumencie**

**Słowa kluczowe:** metoda etnograficzna, badania marketingowe, badania jakościowe

**Streszczenie.** W artykule przedstawiono proces zmian zachowań konsumentów zachodzących na przestrzeni ostatnich lat w zakresie aktywności i zdrowego trybu życia. Jego celem była charakterystyka, analiza oraz ocena motywacji osób prowadzących zdrowy tryb życia, czyli tych, którzy uprawiają sport i stosują zasady zdrowego żywienia. Tezę badania jest to, że konsumenci głównie uprawiają sport dla rozrywki, sprawia im to przyjemność, chcą być w formie, cieszyć się zdrowiem, dobrą kondycją i właściwą sylwetką. Tezę zweryfikowano przeprowadzając eksperymentalne, pilotażowe etnograficzne badania jakościowe – obserwację uczestniczącą. Instrumentem pomiarowym była technika cienia. Weryfikacja postawionej tezy została wsparta analizą oraz oceną aktualnych i dostępnych wtórnych danych ilościowych dotyczących zmian zachowań konsumentów w zakresie aktywności i prowadzenia zdrowego trybu życia.

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**Cytowanie**

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