Business Ethnography in Organizations: An Analysis of Research Patterns and Methodological Trends

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Abstract

Purpose: Despite its growing relevance, the global evolution of business ethnography across sectors, regions, and disciplines remains understudied. This study provides an empirically grounded overview of research patterns and methodological practices within a defined corpus of peer-reviewed publications on ethnographic studies conducted inside business organizations.

Methodology: This study analyses a corpus of 180 peer-reviewed academic papers. Bibliometric techniques, implemented with the bibliometrix package in R, were used to examine patterns of scientific production, disciplinary distribution, and thematic networks. In parallel, manual coding was applied to assess the characteristics of ethnographic fieldwork, including data collection tools and fieldwork duration. Together, these approaches map where and how business ethnography is practiced, identify thematic clusters, and reveal methodological trends.

Findings: Within this corpus, business ethnography appears multidisciplinary and adaptable, with the strongest concentration in ICT, industry/manufacturing, and professional services, and weaker presence in finance, construction, and energy/logistics. Fieldwork locations are heavily skewed toward Western Europe and North America. Thematic patterns combine established organizational concerns (e.g., culture, identity, routines) with expanding digital and socio-technical topics (e.g., algorithms, data work, crowdsourcing). Methodologically, studies rely primarily on participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, and most report comparatively short fieldwork periods, consistent with a broader shift toward rapid and time-bounded ethnography in organizational settings.

Originality: By integrating bibliometric mapping with systematic coding of fieldwork practices, the study provides a focused evidence base on how business ethnography in

organizations is being published and conducted, highlighting recurring emphases, blind spots, and methodological trade-offs relevant to both scholars and applied researchers.

Introduction

Traditionally linked to anthropology, ethnography focuses on understanding sociocultural processes through a qualitative approach that prioritizes the studied subjects' perspectives, practices, meanings, and beliefs (Baba, 2016). Using fieldwork techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, ethnography provides insight into the lived experiences, emotions, and underlying social fabric of the studied subjects (Blomberg and Karasti, 2012). Epistemologically, ethnography is both naturalistic, as it seeks to minimize researchers' intervention in the phenomena being studied (Beuving and De Vries, 2015), and holistic, as it contextualizes cultural elements within broader frameworks of understanding (Baba, 2016; Blomberg and Karasti, 2012).

Early ethnographic studies primarily centred on non-Western societies, often framed through a neocolonial lens (Wilder, 2003). From the mid-20th century onward, however, this orientation began to shift. Laura Nader's (1972) call to "study up" encouraged anthropologists to investigate elites and high-status groups in Western countries, prompting a growing interest in corporations as legitimate objects of research. Parallel to this academic turn, the 1980s marked the entry of ethnographic methods into corporate practice, with landmark initiatives such as Xerox/PARC (Suchman, 2013), IBM's Institute for Research on Learning, and Rick Rubin's Elab (Baba, 2016). The success of these projects not only validated ethnography's relevance beyond anthropology but also catalysed its adoption in fields such as management, marketing, and industrial design, paving the way for its broader application in business contexts.

At its core, a company is an institution made up of people, making it an ideal environment for ethnographic research. In this article, we use the term "business ethnography" to refer to the application of ethnographic methods to study the cultural, symbolic, communicative, and social dynamics that shape both the internal life of organizations and their external relationships with clients, suppliers, regulators, and other actors. Examples of business ethnography include studies analysing production processes, service generation, marketing strategies, and financial management (López, 2017). In the field of design ethnography, for instance, researchers have explored both the conscious and unconscious needs of users to inform product innovation (Merzali and Hamarat, 2022; Wang, 2023). Business ethnography also encompasses investigations into company values and organizational culture, which help decode the shared norms guiding everyday practices within organizations.

While these examples illustrate the versatility of business ethnography, its growing popularity has also led to a divergence in methodological approaches. On one side, research continues to follow the traditional ethnographic approach, which involves temporally extensive and immersive fieldwork. Notable examples include Karen Ho's (2009) in-depth study of Wall Street investment banks, as well as the workplace research conducted by Spanish anthropologists Baztán (2004) and Roca (1998). On the other hand,

ethnography has become commodified and increasingly offered as a B2B service[1] characterized by faster, standardized, and cost-optimized methods (Baba, 2016). This has created a methodological tension between the analytical depth of traditional ethnography and the pragmatic adaptability of its commercial variants. This bifurcation parallels the distinction Clifford Geertz made between 'models of' and 'models for,' where the former represent primarily conceptual approaches, while the latter are geared towards practical, applied uses.

Urban and Koh (2013) propose that ethnographic research on corporations can be broadly divided into two analytical orientations: *ethnographies of corporate inner workings* and *ethnographies of corporate effects*. The former approach examines corporations from the inside, focusing on organizational culture, everyday practices, decision-making processes, and the symbolic and social dynamics that structure corporate life. This type of research is conducted both by academic researchers and by practitioners or employees working within companies. The latter, by contrast, analyses the broader social, environmental, and political consequences of corporate activity, often situating firms as external forces shaping communities, labour markets, or ecological systems. This distinction is closely tied to enduring ethical debates within anthropology. While ethnographies of corporate effects are often aligned with critical or oppositional ethical stances, insider-oriented research raises questions about accountability, transparency, and the potential tension between analytical engagement and corporate interests.

Despite its significance, only few studies have thoroughly examined the existing trends in scientific production related to the use of ethnography in business contexts. Notable works in this area include that of Bansal et al. (2024), who provide a bibliometric review of netnography -a specific form of ethnography- within business research; Moore's (2011) review of the use of anthropology in international organizations; Urban and Koh's (2013) reflections on the unique challenges of ethnographic research in corporations; and the volume edited by Denny and Sunderland (2016) on anthropology and business. Additionally, studies on the development of ethnography in the business sector have been conducted in various countries, including Japan (Ito, 2018) and Colombia (García-González and González-Vélez, 2020). While these works offer valuable insights, none provides a comprehensive, cross-sectoral, and geographically broad overview of academic production on business ethnography. To address this gap, and following Urban and Koh's (2013) distinction, the present article conducts a bibliometric review on ethnographic studies of the internal workings of business organizations, guided by the following questions:

(1) Which business sectors and geographic regions have seen the most development in the literature on business ethnography?

[1] B2B (Business-to-Business) denotes a commercial model and organizational paradigm where the exchange of value, goods, or services occurs between two or more corporate entities rather than between a firm and an individual end-consumer.

(2) What are the trends in scientific production related to business ethnography regarding growth and disciplinary composition?
(3) What are the most common topics explored in the literature on business ethnography?
(4) What are the key characteristics of the ethnographic methodologies employed in the literature?

By answering these questions, this study provides the first comprehensive mapping of the current state and trajectory of ethnographic research in business contexts. It identifies where and how business ethnography is being applied, reveals its sectoral and geographic imbalances, and highlights distinctive methodological patterns. Such a panoramic view is critical for advancing theory, guiding methodological choices, and ensuring that research agendas respond to emerging business and societal needs. Beyond academia, these insights equip practitioners, consultants, and organizations to make more informed decisions when commissioning or applying ethnographic studies as a business-to-business (B2B) service. In doing so, the article not only addresses a clear gap in the literature but also contributes to the methodological development of anthropology, business administration, and related disciplines, strengthening the bridge between scholarly research and applied practice.

This article claims that business ethnography, as reflected in academic production, is a multidisciplinary field marked by sectoral and geographic unevenness, continuity with classical ethnographic methods, and a clear trend toward shorter fieldwork periods. These findings raise broader questions: whether existing sectoral and regional gaps constrain theoretical generalizability; whether the shift toward abbreviated fieldwork reflects methodological innovation or a normative accommodation to specific constraints; and whether business ethnography risks becoming a 'model for' organizational efficiency rather than a 'model of' critical social analysis. The article is primarily addressed to academic researchers, instructors, and graduate students in business anthropology, organizational ethnography, and related fields, seeking a comprehensive overview of how ethnographic research in business organizations has evolved. The article also serves applied anthropologists and organizational practitioners navigating methodological choices and ethical tensions in corporate settings

The article is structured as follows: following this introduction, the methodology section outlines the bibliometric analysis process, including literature selection criteria and the analytical tools used. Next, the results are presented in four subsections: sectoral and geographical analysis, trends in scientific production, thematic analysis, and an exploration of methodological approaches and temporal aspects. This is followed by a discussion section, which interprets the results in the broader context of the literature, examining the implications for business ethnography. Finally, the conclusions of the study are presented.

2. Methodology

Bibliometric studies are a robust method for mapping the intellectual and thematic

structure of a research field by identifying key themes, growth trends, networks, and collaboration patterns (Donthu et al., 2021). Contemporary approaches increasingly use advanced statistical techniques to enhance precision and scalability (Bansal et al., 2024; Mantilla and Vercoutère Quinche, 2021). To address the research questions, this study integrates bibliometric analysis with manual coding strategies, as outlined below.

The bibliometric analysis involved three phases: (a) identification of relevant records in databases, (b) selection of a definitive corpus of literature, and (c) analysis of the collected information. The first phase involved searching for articles in the Scopus database, chosen for its extensive interdisciplinary coverage, high citation indexing standards, and wide adoption in bibliometric research. The search was conducted using the following Boolean search strings applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords: 'corporate AND ethnography,' 'entrepreneurship AND ethnography,' and 'ethnography AND business.' These broad search terms were used to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the field. The search produced 1,812 records, of which 197 were excluded due to duplication, non-article formats (e.g., books), inaccessible documents, or research written in languages other than English, Spanish, or French. Figure 1 provides a detailed breakdown of this process. he use of a Boolean search strategy aligns with established bibliometric guidelines and enhances transparency and replicability in corpus construction (Donthu et al., 2021).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established based on the research questions and on a conceptual focus on ethnographic studies of the internal workings of business organizations, as per Urban and Koh (2013) classification. By design, all studies included in the sample are empirically grounded, encompassing ethnographic research conducted by academic researchers as well as by practitioners or company employees working within organizational settings. Titles and abstracts from all records identified in the previous phase were manually reviewed. To be included, articles were required to explicitly employ ethnographic methods and to treat the business organization itself as the primary field site of analysis, examining internal organizational processes, practices, cultures, or decision-making dynamics. Accordingly, exclusion criteria comprised: a) publications applying ethnography in non-business settings; b) studies primarily focused on the social, environmental, or political effects of corporate activity beyond organizational boundaries (e.g., community impacts or environmental pollution); c) analyses centred on specific products, markets, or campaigns rather than organizational processes; and d) economic or policy-oriented studies in which the company was not the central unit of ethnographic analysis. Based on these criteria, the final corpus consisted of 180 articles.

The aim of this study was not to retrieve all anthropological or observational research related to corporations, but rather to identify ethnographic studies that explicitly self-identify as such and that are conducted within business organizations. Accordingly, the search strategy was designed to prioritize precision over maximal recall, in line with the study's analytical focus on ethnography as a declared methodological orientation rather than as an inferred research practice. We acknowledge that this approach necessarily excludes studies that may be ethnographic in practice but do not label themselves as such (e.g., observational studies that avoid the term "ethnography"). This

trade-off was considered acceptable in order to ensure conceptual coherence within a bibliometric framework.

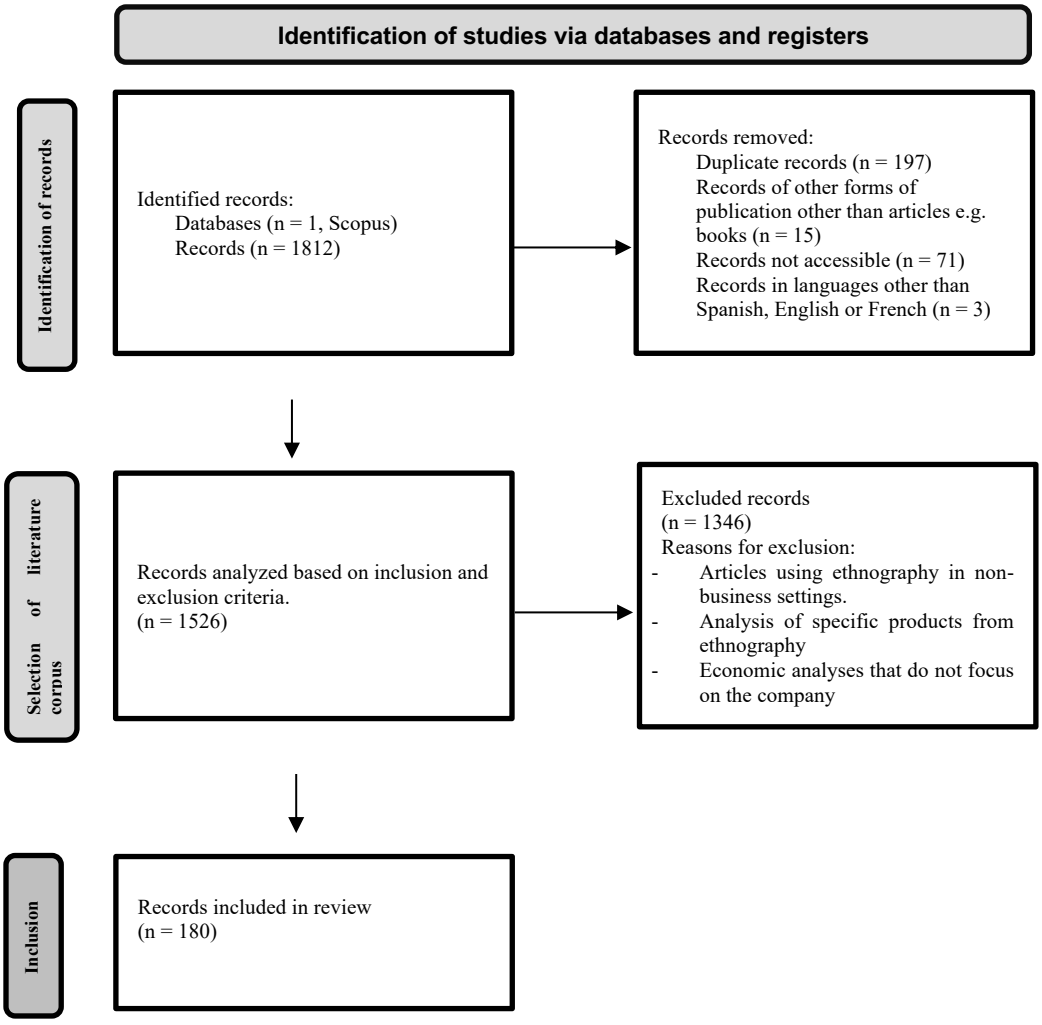

Figure 1. Selection process for the corpus of literature

Bibliometric indicators were calculated using the bibliometrix package in R, including annual publication trends, disciplinary distribution, most cited authors, and thematic mapping. In line with science mapping approaches advocated by Župič and Čater (2015), this quantitative analysis was complemented by a manual coding of article abstracts to capture methodological characteristics not directly observable through bibliometric indicators. Specifically, the manual coding focused on ethnographic fieldwork practices, including data collection tools and fieldwork duration. The combination of bibliometric analysis and manual coding enabled a comprehensive mapping of thematic, sectoral, and methodological patterns across the corpus.

3. Results

This section presents the main findings of the bibliometric analysis, organized into four key areas based on the research questions: 1) sectoral and geographic distribution of studies, 2) growth trends in scientific production, 3) thematic analysis, and 4) analysis of the ethnographic methodologies employed.

3.1 Sectoral and Geographic Patterns in Business Ethnography

a) Distribution by Business Sector

Table 1 presents the distribution of publications according to the business sectors in which ethnographic methods were applied. Information and communication technology (ICT) constitutes the largest share of the sample, accounting for 18.1% of the publications. This prominence reflects the increasing importance of ethnographic approaches to examine organizational cultures, innovation processes, and everyday practices within technology-intensive environments. Industry and manufacturing represent the second most frequently studied sector at 14.0%, covering subsectors such as the food, textile, automotive, and steel industries. Professional services and consulting follow closely (13.5%), followed by retail trade (7.02%) and creative industries, design, and entertainment (6.43%).

This diversity demonstrates the adaptability of ethnographic methods to both production- and service-oriented environments. However, the data also reveal notable gaps: sectors such as financial and banking services (5.67%), construction (3.51%), and energy, transportation, and logistics (0.58%) remain comparatively underexplored despite their global economic significance. These gaps suggest opportunities for future research, particularly comparative studies that examine how sector-specific dynamics influence the adoption and adaptation of ethnographic tools.

	Number of items	**Percentage**
Information and communication technology (ICT)	31	18.1

Industry and manufacturing	24	14.0
Professional services and consulting	23	13.5
Unspecified / multiple *	16	9.36
Retail trade	12	7.02
Creative industries, design and entertainment	11	6.43
Financial and banking services	9	5.26
Non-profit organizations	9	5.26
Tourism and hospitality	9	5.26
Health and wellness	8	4.68
Construction	6	3.51
Education and academia	4	2.34
Gaming and casino industry	4	2.34
Media and communication	4	2.34
Energy, transportation and logistics	1	0.585

Table 1. Distribution of business ethnography publications by sector.
*The Unspecified/Multiple category includes studies that either do not identify a specific business sector or examine multiple sectors without reporting sector-specific findings.

b) Geographic Distribution of Fieldwork

Table 2 categorizes the articles based on the geographical regions where the fieldwork was conducted. The results reveal an uneven distribution between the Global North and South, with a significant concentration of studies in Western Europe (40.9%) and North America (24.6%). In contrast, there is limited representation from regions such as South America (2.29%), Eastern Europe (1.75%), and Central America (0.585%). It is also worth noting that several publications involve fieldwork conducted simultaneously in two or more countries.

This concentration in economically dominant regions likely reflects structural factors such as the location of multinational headquarters, stronger research funding ecosystems, and higher publication rates in English-language journals. However, it also means that current knowledge in business ethnography is disproportionately shaped by Western business environments, raising questions about its applicability in diverse cultural and economic contexts.

	Number of Items	**Percentage**
Western Europe	70	40.9
North America	42	24.6
East Asia	14	8.19
South Asia	10	5.85
Southeast Asia	8	4.68
Oceania	7	4.09
South America	5	2.92
Unspecified/multiple	4	2.34

Middle East	4	2.34
Africa	3	1.75
Eastern Europe	3	1.75
Central America	1	0.585

Table 2. Geographical distribution of business ethnography fieldwork by world region.
* The Not applicable category (7.40%) includes studies that did not specify a fieldwork location or that were based on secondary data, virtual ethnography without a defined geographic setting, or conceptual/theoretical contributions.

Despite these tendencies, several studies conducted in the Global South illustrate the importance and possibilities of business ethnography in these contexts. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, Lauriks, Siebörger, and De Vos (2015) employ linguistic ethnography in a South African business to show how hierarchy, authority, and agency are strategically negotiated through everyday workplace interaction in a post-apartheid context, while Sallaz (2005) examines labor discipline and managerial control in African service-sector organizations, demonstrating how global corporate models are reworked through localized labor regimes. In the Middle East, Azouz, Antheaume, and Charles-Pauvers (2022) provide a rare longitudinal ethnography of a faith-led family firm operating in the United Arab Emirates, highlighting how religiosity shapes organizational resilience, decision-making, and labor relations under conditions of political and regulatory instability following the Arab Spring. In Ecuador, Hill, Fernández-Salvador, and Williams (2025) study Banco Pichincha's organizational transformation, revealing gaps between management's superficial change initiatives and employees' experiences of a persistent hierarchical culture. Employees described the bank as a middle-aged man in crisis, wearing trendy accessories but maintaining the same attitude, illustrating tensions between cosmetic modernization and deeper cultural resistance. Gaggiotti (2010) provides a multi-sited organizational ethnography of a multinational corporation operating across Latin America and Europe, focusing on how managers construct, contest, and reinterpret official corporate narratives through everyday storytelling and memory practices. Rather than treating organizations as culturally homogeneous, his analysis shows how organizational meaning-making emerges through transnational mobility, power asymmetries, and competing temporalities.

3.2 Trends in Scientific Production

a) Annual Growth in Publications

The publication trends, illustrated in Figure 2, show a marked and sustained increase in the literature on business ethnography over the past two decades, reflecting its growing recognition as a valuable methodological approach in business research. The peak year was 2021, with 16 records indexed in Scopus, continuing an upward trajectory observed since the mid-2000s. The corpus begins in 1996, the year of the first identified article in the sample, which coincides with the early diffusion of ethnographic methods into corporate and management studies.

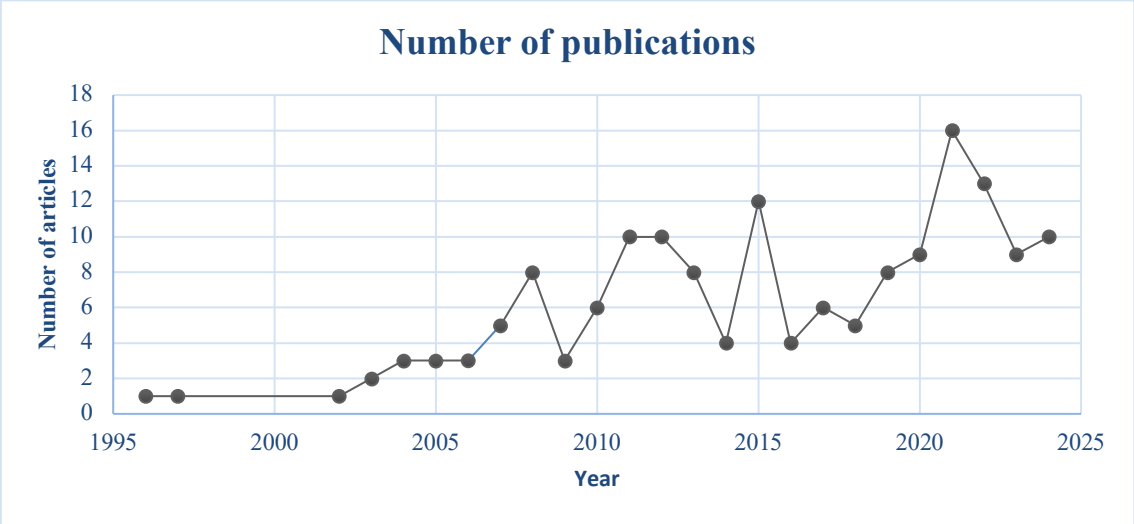

Figure 2: Annual growth of publications on business ethnography

b) Disciplinary Spread of Publications

Contemporary business ethnography is an inherently multidisciplinary field of study. Figure 3 classifies the articles based on the knowledge areas of the journals in which they were published, following the categories established by Scopus. The results show a diverse disciplinary spread, yet with clear centres of gravity. The largest share is concentrated in the social sciences (31.17%) and arts and humanities (12.03%), reflecting the methodological and theoretical roots of ethnography, alongside business, management, and accounting (26.53%) and economics, econometrics, and finance (8.02%), which highlight its increasing integration into applied business research. Other significant disciplinary contributors include computer science (8.64%), decision sciences (3.39%), engineering (2.46%), and psychology (2.41%).

These aggregate patterns are reflected in a set of concrete studies that illustrate how business ethnography operates at the intersection of multiple disciplinary traditions. For example**,** Engdahl (2024**)** provides an ethnographic analysis of the construction of a large-scale machine-learning benchmark dataset, showing how standards, annotation practices, and "alignment work" are negotiated within a corporate–academic collaboration, thereby complementing dominant quantitative approaches to datasets with socio-technical analysis. Similarly, Pronzato (2023) examines algorithmic governance in an Italian television platform, combining organizational ethnography with critical algorithm studies to analyze how engineers, managers, and designers negotiate values such as efficiency, creativity, and control in the design of recommendation systems. Relatedly, Pedersen and Bossen (2024) draw on extended ethnographic fieldwork in a healthcare business intelligence unit to study how data products become boundary objects across professional domains, contributing simultaneously to organization studies, CSCW, and the emerging field of data work studies. Okpara, Werner, Murray, and Damian conduct a three-month ethnography-informed case study of a software organization to examine how teams build a shared understanding of non-functional requirements in continuous software engineering contexts. Their study

combines ethnographic observation and interviews with requirements engineering and computer science, demonstrating how informal communication infrastructures and virtual workspaces shape organizational coordination in highly technical environments.

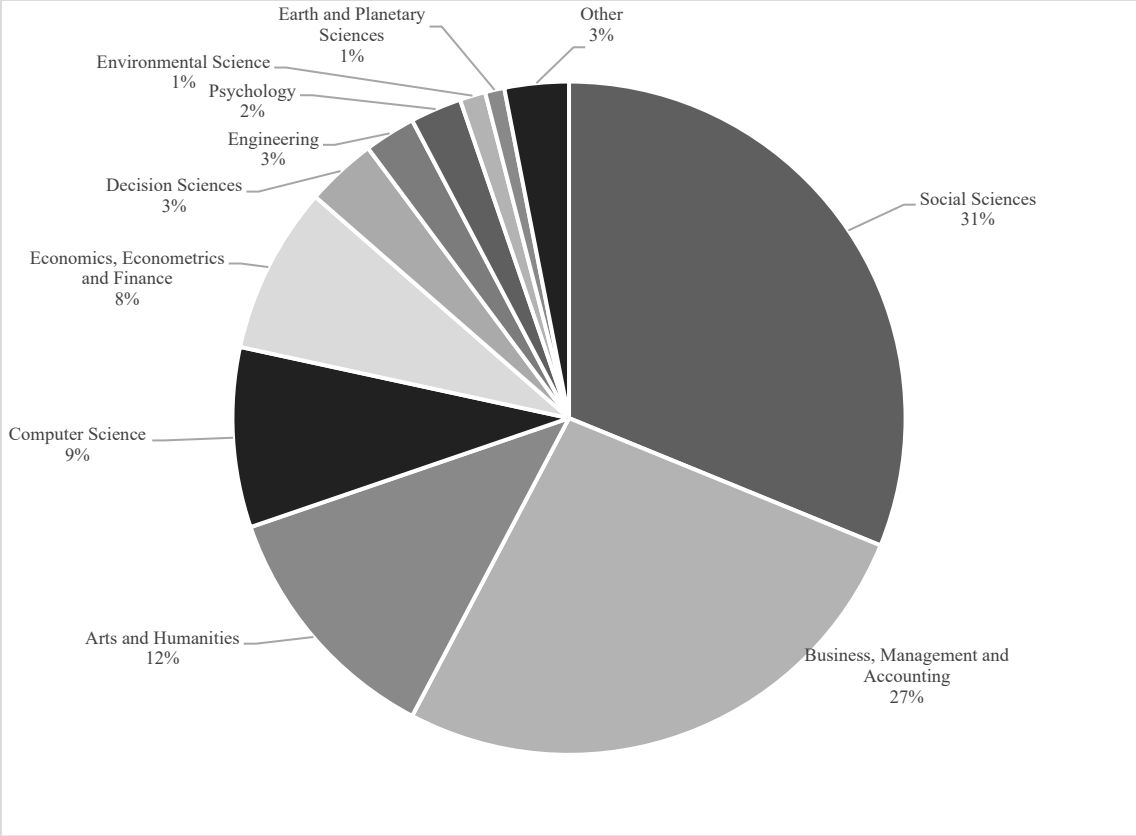

Figure 3: Disciplinary distribution of business ethnography publications by Scopus subject categories.

In terms of journal publication frequency, the Journal of Business Ethics and the Journal of Organizational Ethnography appear most prominently. These are followed by Big Data & Society, Administrative Science Quarterly, Human Relations, the International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research and Organization.

c) Most Cited Works

Global citation analysis measures the total number of citations a paper has received in any indexed publication within a specific database (Batista-Canino, Santana-Hernández and Medina-Brito, 2023). Table 3 displays the results of this analysis within the corpus of literature on business ethnography in the Scopus database. Citation counts provide an indicator of scholarly influence and help identify the works that have shaped theoretical, methodological, or applied developments in the field. The two most cited articles are 'Doing Gender, Doing Entrepreneurship: An Ethnographic Account of Intertwined Practices' by Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2004) and 'Boundary Negotiating Artifacts: Unbinding the Routine of Boundary Objects and Embracing Chaos in Collaborative Work' by Lee (2007).

Article	Author	Total Citations	TC per Year	Normalized TC
Attila Bruni, Silvia Gherardi and Barbara Poggio	Doing Gender, Doing Entrepreneurship: An Ethnographic Account of Intertwined Practices	594	25,83	2,97
Charlotte P. Lee	Boundary Negotiating Artifacts: Unbinding the Routine of Boundary Objects and Embracing Chaos in Collaborative Work	301	15,05	2,42
Frans Bévort and Roy Suddaby	Scripting professional identities: how individuals make sense of contradictory institutional logics	229	20,82	3,01
Phil Taylor and Peter Bain	'Subterranean Worksick Blues': Humour as Subversion in Two Call Centres	222	9,25	1,99
Simon Down and Lorraine Warren	Constructing narratives of enterprise: clichés and entrepreneurial self-identity	201	10,58	5,40
Peter Skærbæk and Kjell Tryggestad	The role of accounting devices in performing corporate strategy	179	10,53	4,71
Tony J. Watson	Entrepreneurial Action, Identity Work and the Use of Multiple Discursive Resources: The Case of a Rapidly Changing Family Business	154	8,56	2,05
Erik Fisher	Ethnographic Invention: Probing the Capacity of Laboratory Decisions	153	7,65	1,23
Noriko Yagi and Jill Kleinberg	Boundary work: An interpretive ethnographic perspective on negotiating and leveraging cross-cultural identity	143	8,94	2,97
Ruth Wodak, Winston Kwon, and Ian Clarke	'Getting people on board': Discursive leadership for consensus building in team meetings	118	7,38	2,45

Table 3. Most cited articles in the business ethnography literature (Scopus citations).

3.3 Thematic Structure of Business Ethnography

The thematic structure of a field of study can be effectively analysed using bibliometric tools (Cobo et al., 2011). Such an analysis not only maps the main intellectual clusters but also reveals how topics evolve and connect within the research landscape A thematic analysis provides metrics to assess both the degree of development and the relevance of identified topics within the field. The degree of development of a theme is quantified using Callon's density index, which measures the strength of internal connections between keywords that describe a research topic. Additionally, the relevance of each theme is evaluated through Callon's Centrality, which quantifies the importance of a theme in the overall development of the field of study (Necula and Păvăloaia, 2023).

Based on the results reported in Table 4, *ethnography* constitutes the central thematic anchor of the literature (centrality = 0.894; density = 58.717), although its density indicates a well-developed internal structure, its comparatively higher centrality underscores its integrative function across multiple thematic domains. Closely related methodological orientations appear in clusters such as *autoethnography* (centrality = 0.063; density = 62.5) and *organizational ethnography* (centrality = 0.083; density = 25), suggesting diversification within ethnographic approaches, albeit with more limited influence on the overall thematic configuration of the field.

Several applied and theoretically oriented themes display high internal development but lower centrality, indicating specialized yet relatively peripheral positions.

Notably, *agency* exhibits the highest density among all clusters (127.778) while maintaining modest centrality (0.167), reflecting a mature and internally cohesive body of work focused on action, subjectivity, and practice, but with weaker connections to other dominant themes. Similarly, *business models* (centrality = 0.75; density = 85.714) and *algorithms* (centrality = 0; density = 66.667) point to well-developed research strands addressing organizational design and digital infrastructures, though their limited centrality suggests that these topics remain somewhat compartmentalized within the literature. Themes such as *identity* (centrality = 0.25; density = 63.889), and *critical events* (centrality = 0.25; density = 50) occupy intermediate positions, combining moderate relevance with varying degrees of internal cohesion. Finally, a set of low-centrality and low-density themes, including *boundary objects*, *innovation*, *linguistic ethnography*, and *experimentatio*n, represent emerging or marginal topics that are weakly integrated into the main thematic structure of the field.

Overall, the thematic map suggests a field anchored in ethnographic methodology, characterized by a combination of highly developed but specialized thematic clusters and a limited number of integrative core themes. This configuration points to a fragmented yet methodologically coherent research landscape, where ethnography functions as a unifying framework while substantive topics remain unevenly connected across the literature.

Cluster	Callon Centrality	Callon Density	Rank Centrality	Rank Density	Cluster Frequency
Ethnography	0,894	58,717	21	13	137
Performance	0	62,5	6,5	15	4
Autoethnography	0,063	62,5	13	15	10
Business models	0,75	85,714	20	20	14
Business	0	62,5	6,5	15	4
Boundary objects	0	50	6,5	7,5	2
Algorithms	0	66,667	6,5	18	6
Innovation	0	50	6,5	7,5	2
Framing	0	75	6,5	19	6
Linguistic ethnography	0	50	6,5	7,5	2
Corporate social responsibility	0,125	25	15	1,5	4
Performativity	0	50	6,5	7,5	2
Organizational culture	0	50	6,5	7,5	2
Organizational ethnography	0,083	25	14	1,5	4
Literacy	0,25	50	18	7,5	2
Agency	0,167	127,778	16	21	13
Experimentation	0	50	6,5	7,5	2
Communication	0	50	6,5	7,5	5
Identity	0,25	63,889	18	17	7
Critical events	0,25	50	18	7,5	2

Table 4. Thematic clusters in business ethnography: Callon's centrality and density values.

3.4 Methodological Approaches in Business Ethnography

a) Ethnographic Tools

As a research tool, ethnography employs various instruments in its approach to fieldwork. Traditionally, participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis have formed the methodological core of ethnographic research (Given, 2008). However, the evolution of the field and advances in technology have significantly expanded this repertoire to include audiovisual techniques, virtual content analysis, and participatory methods, allowing ethnographers to engage with increasingly complex and digitalized work environments.

Table 5 summarizes the ethnographic tools employed in the analysed corpus. The results indicate that classical methods continue to dominate data collection practices. Participant observation and interviews are the most frequently used techniques, each accounting for 27.3% of all recorded observations, followed by documentary analysis at 21.9%. Together, these three methods comprise the majority of ethnographic tools identified, underscoring the continued centrality of immersive and text-based approaches in business ethnography.

Beyond these core methods, a range of supplementary tools appear with considerably lower frequency. Content analysis (5.57%) and non-participant observation (5.01%) represent the most common complementary approaches, followed by analysis of web pages (3.53%), shadowing (2.78%), participatory methods (2.04%), and video and visual content analysis (2.04%), and auto-ethnography (1.11%) Other tools appear only sporadically, each accounting for less than 0.4% of the total observations. Overall, this distribution indicates that while business ethnography has incorporated a broader methodological toolkit, the field remains firmly grounded in traditional ethnographic practices, with newer and more experimental methods playing a marginal role in empirical research designs.

	Number of observations	**Percentage**
Participant observation	147	27.3
Interviews	147	27.3
Documentary analysis	118	21.9
Content analysis	30	5.57
Non-participant observation	27	5.01
Online observation and analysis of web pages	19	3.53
Shadowing	15	2.78
Participatory techniques	11	2.04
Video and visual content analy	11	2.04
Auto-ethnography and reflexive	6	1.11
Focus groups	2	0.371
Narrative analysis	2	0.371
On-site design	2	0.371
Rapid prototyping	1	0.186

Survey research	1	0.186

Table 5. Ethnographic tools employed in business ethnography studies

b) Duration of Fieldwork

Traditionally, ethnography has been defined by the temporal exhaustiveness of fieldwork under the assumption that prolonged immersion fosters a deep understanding of sociocultural dynamics (Trnka, 2017). However, an increasing trend toward ethnographic research relies on much shorter periods of immersion, often lasting only a few months or even weeks. This shift has led to the emergence of 'rapid ethnography' approaches (Isaacs, 2016; Millen, 2000), particularly in technological and medical research fields. In the business sector, adopting rapid, standardized forms of ethnography has provoked critical debates. In the business sector, the adoption of rapid, standardized ethnographic forms has sparked critical debate. Some scholars view this trend as an adaptation to contemporary organizational needs, while others raise concerns about the commodification and potential dilution of ethnographic rigor, particularly when ethnography is deployed as a B2B service (Baba, 2016).

Figure 4 shows that the majority of studies in the sample were conducted over relatively short periods -29.3% lasted between 0 and 6 months, and 26.75% between 7 and 12 months- suggesting that time constraints are a defining feature of contemporary business ethnography. Notably, a smaller yet significant share (4.46%) involved extended engagements exceeding 49 months, indicating that long-term immersion, while rare, remains an important mode of practice in certain contexts. These patterns raise important questions about the trade-offs between temporal scope, methodological depth, and the demands of applied research environments.

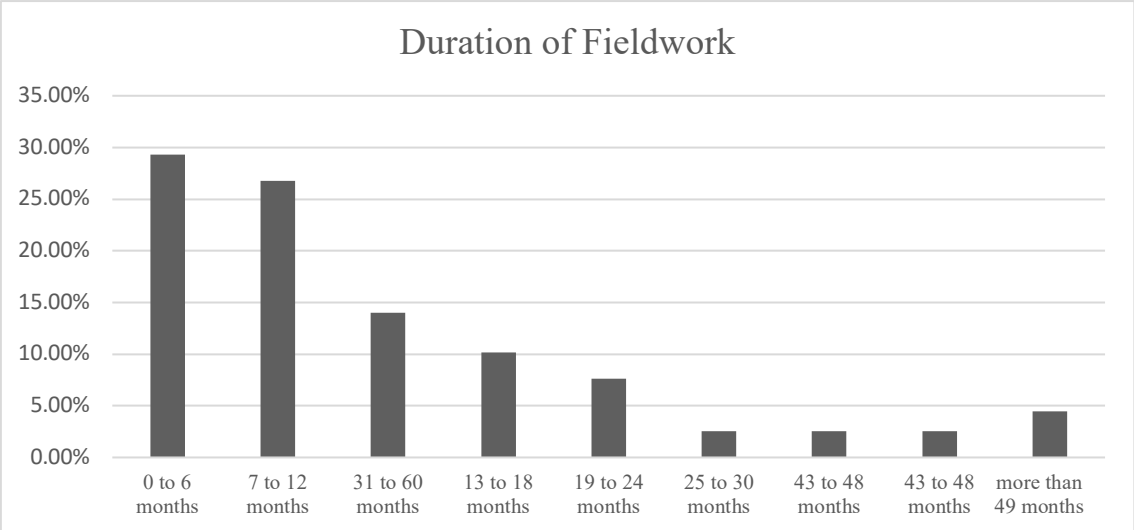

Figure 4. Duration of fieldwork reported in studies (percentage of total sample)

4. Discussion

This section discusses the most significant findings from the bibliometric review of business ethnography. Following the structure maintained throughout the article, the discussion is organized around four main strands: sectoral and geographic trends, growth trends in the field, predominant thematic areas, and the methodological and time-related aspects of ethnographic research in business.

Sectoral and Geographic Trends

The findings indicate that ethnography is applied across a broad range of business sectors, though with a clear concentration in a limited number of fields. The largest share of studies is located in information and communication technology (ICT) (18.1%), industry and manufacturing (14.0%), professional services and consulting (13.5%), retail trade (7.02%), creative industries, design, and entertainment (6.43%), and health and wellness accounts for a smaller but still visible share of the literature (4.68%). These patterns underscore the versatility of ethnographic methods across both production- and service-oriented environments. For instance, ethnographic approaches are utilized in areas as varied as corporate social responsibility (Coronado and Fallon, 2011; Hemingway and Starkey, 2018), software development (Boden, Müller, and Nett, 2011; França et al., 2014), and healthcare settings (Shaw et al., 2017; González-Santos, 2016; Ootes et al., 2013). Quantitatively, ICT emerges as the leading sector for business ethnography, signalling a partial shift away from the field's traditional emphasis on industrial production, although industry and manufacturing remain a central area of empirical engagement.

Despite this sectoral diversity, several economically significant fields remain comparatively underrepresented. Financial and banking services (5.26%), construction (3.51%), and energy, transportation, and logistics (0.585%) account for only a small proportion of the analysed studies. Given the scale and ongoing transformation of these sectors, driven by processes of digitalization, globalization, and sustainability transitions, their limited presence points to important gaps in the literature. In this sense, while the breadth of sectors covered constitutes a strength of business ethnography, the persistent underrepresentation of high-impact industries represents a missed opportunity to extend ethnographic inquiry into organizational domains undergoing rapid structural change.

The geographic distribution reveals an even sharper imbalance, with Western Europe and North America dominating the field. This disparity can be attributed to global geopolitical and economic dynamics, which result in lower levels of research and a slower adoption of new methodologies in developing countries (Baker, 2023). Given this geographical bias, these findings call into question the generalizability of current knowledge in business ethnography. In other words, significant spatial gaps exist within the literature, making it difficult to consider current insights in business ethnography as universally applicable. Instead, they should be viewed as constructs shaped by specific geographic contexts.

The results of the geographical analysis are particularly relevant for anthropology, as they reflect a reversal of the discipline's original trends. Historically, anthropology was primarily focused on the study of colonial spaces by Western researchers (Shokeid, 2001). In contrast, contemporary anthropological research in business is now predominantly concentrated on the Global North. This shift coincides with broader processes of decolonization of anthropological fieldwork (Gregorio-Gil and Alcázar-Campos, 2014). However, it is important to note that the business sector has traditionally been associated with capitalist development in Western countries. This bias may result in peripheral regions being overlooked as significant for business-related anthropological research. The underrepresentation of regions such as Central and South America, Eastern Europe, and Africa not only highlights a bias in current research but also reveals substantial opportunities for future ethnographic studies in these areas.

Growth and Multidisciplinary Nature of the Field

The increase in publications on business ethnography over the past two decades highlights the growing prominence of the field within academic spheres. These findings align with the broader rise in using qualitative methodologies in business research (Javadian et al., 2020). At the knowledge area level, the results underscore the multidisciplinary nature of business ethnography, yet they also reveal two dominant disciplinary centres of gravity: (a) the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities, and (b) business-centred disciplines such as Business, Management, Accounting and Economics. This dual orientation reflects the field's hybrid identity, rooted in interpretive, context-sensitive traditions while also engaging directly with performance, strategy, and market outcomes. These trends are not unexpected, given that business ethnography evolved from anthropological scholarship yet has progressively embedded itself within the practical problem-solving agendas of business disciplines.

Other disciplines, such as Computer Science, Engineering. Psychology, Decision Sciences, and Medicine, further illustrate the breadth of ethnographic applications within business contexts. Future research should focus on analysing the conceptual frameworks that underlie the use of ethnography in each discipline. Such studies would help map the theoretical foundations and characteristics of this evolving field.

Thematic Areas

The thematic analysis confirms the diversity of substantive concerns addressed within business ethnography, while also highlighting how unevenly these concerns are integrated into the core of the field. Because the sample focuses specifically on ethnographic investigations conducted within business settings -rather than on the broader societal impacts of companies- it is not surprising that themes explicitly addressing the social dimensions of business display relatively low centrality. Clusters such as corporate social responsibility (centrality = 0.125; density = 25) and identity (centrality = 0.25; density = 63.89) illustrate this pattern. The absence of gender-related themes is striking. Given the central role of gender in contemporary anthropological

scholarship, this omission points to a significant gap in the literature and suggests an important direction for future inquiry (Baer, 2020).

A prominent thematic area concerns business organization and organizational practice. Themes such as organizational culture (centrality = 0; density = 50), organizational ethnography (centrality = 0.083; density = 25), and business models (centrality = 0.75; density = 85.71) point to sustained ethnographic engagement with how organizations are structured, enacted, and interpreted in everyday practice. Although some of these themes exhibit limited centrality, their relatively high density indicates well-developed and internally coherent lines of inquiry. In this respect, ethnographic approaches remain particularly well suited to capturing the micro-level processes through which organizational arrangements are produced and sustained (Lopez, 2017). The presence of methodological clusters such as autoethnography (centrality = 0.063; density = 62.5) and organizational ethnography further signals a reflexive orientation within the literature, in which methodological positioning and researcher involvement are explicitly foregrounded.

The analysis also reveals a distinct set of themes linked to technological and digital domains. Clusters such as algorithms (centrality = 0; density = 66.67) and agency (centrality = 0.167; density = 127.78) suggest a growing interest in how digital systems, automation, and data-driven processes shape organizational action and decision-making. Although these themes remain weakly connected to the overall thematic structure, their high density indicates mature and specialized research strands. This pattern aligns with the sectoral findings, which identify information and communication technology as the most prominent empirical domain for business ethnography. More broadly, it reflects an ongoing expansion of ethnographic and qualitative approaches into areas traditionally dominated by quantitative or technical methodologies, including innovation processes, digital infrastructures, and human–technology relations.

The rapid emergence of large language models, machine learning, and other artificial intelligence technologies in organizations has created an important area of inquiry for ethnography, with significant promise as a frontier topic for future research. Ethnographic approaches have been used to explore how these technologies depend on contingent social relations, and institutional contexts, challenging the view of AI as a purely technical phenomenon, as well as how AI reshapes the workplace by introducing new forms of struggle and vulnerability. For instance, Dahlman et al. (2021) show that algorithms take shape through situated organizational interactions, negotiations, and shifting roles within a fintech startup; and Engdahl (2024) demonstrates that benchmark datasets are built through hands-on coordination and interpretive alignment work among scientists, participants, and annotators. This literature shows that ethnography is uniquely positioned to reveal the social and organizational dimensions of AI that remain invisible to quantitative and technical approaches, making it an important tool for understanding how artificial intelligence is actually enacted in organizational life.

Following the framework proposed by Cobo et al. (2011), several clusters can be classified as emerging or specialized themes, characterized by low centrality combined with moderate to high density. These include critical events (centrality = 0.25; density =

50) and corporate social responsibility, which, while peripheral to the main developmental trajectory of the field, represent analytically rich areas with strong potential for future research, particularly as organizations confront increasing uncertainty, ethical scrutiny, and social accountability.

The low centrality of themes such as social responsibility and identity aligns with the tensions discussed in recent anthropological debates. The "difficulty of critiquing the hand that feeds" (Salverda, 2019) may explain why business ethnography remains clustered around internal organizational culture and ICT dynamics. The data suggests a field that, quantitatively, is highly integrated into corporate inner structures, but remains hesitant to engage in the adversarial critique of corporate effects advocated by Appel (2019).

Methodological Approaches and Time-Related Aspects

Most ethnographic literature employs three main tools: participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. These methods have been foundational since the origins of ethnographic research, as seen in studies such as Malinowski's (2013) in the Trobriand Islands. Thus, the literature on entrepreneurial ethnography maintains a line of continuity with classical approaches. However, the use of contemporary technological tools, such as audiovisual methods and digital media remains marginal in this corpus of literature. This does not imply that these technological tools are not utilized in coding or analysing ethnographic information since the findings presented in this article focus solely on data collection tools.

Additionally, an analysis of the temporal duration of fieldwork reveals a shift towards shorter study periods compared to traditional ethnography. The most prevalent investigations are conducted over 0-6 months (29.3%) and 7-12 months (26.75%). This trend toward shorter studies may be connected to increasing time and resource pressures in both academic and commercial research contexts. Authors such as Otto (2013) emphasize the necessity for long-term ethnographic studies to gain a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics, while others, such as Baba (2016), question the depth and quality of insights that can be achieved through shorter research periods. Beyond these criticisms, it is evident that the future outlook indicates a continuation of these temporal trends. Overall, the ethnography developed in this body of literature is characterized by a reliance on classic data collection instruments, albeit adapted for shorter timeframes.

Methodological and Ethical Implications of Short-Term Ethnography in Business Organizations

A defining methodological trend identified in this review is the increasing prevalence of short-term ethnographic research within business organizations. Given the historical link of ethnography to traditional anthropology, this shift is often viewed as contentious; the classical paradigm dictates that researchers must dedicate years to fieldwork to achieve legitimacy. Consequently, short-term ethnographies are frequently

dismissed as not being "anthropological enough" (Logan, Kihlström, & Mehta, 2023). Indeed, by 1995, a two-year fieldwork term had become the discipline's idealized standard (Wolcott, as cited in Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). In theory, long-term fieldwork is intended to ensure data saturation and methodological rigor (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Goulding, 2005), whereas reduced time in the field can constrain a researcher's ability to build long-term relationships, observe informal organizational dynamics, or capture the nuances of longitudinal change.

However, recent literature challenges the notion that extended immersion is the only path to ethnographic rigour. Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020) argue that methodologies are inevitably shaped by researchers' "own lives and... multiple professional and personal commitments -from childcare and health concerns to financial, environmental, political, and temporal constraints." For many scholars, family obligations and limited access to funding, particularly for graduate students and early-career researchers, render multi-year, in-person fieldwork an impossibility (Logan, Kihlström, & Mehta, 2023).

In response, alternative frameworks such as "rapid," "short-term," and "patchwork" ethnography have emerged. These approaches adapt to contemporary constraints without sacrificing rigor. Pink and Morgan (2013) posit that short-term ethnography is not merely a "fast" version of traditional fieldwork but a specialized, intensive strategy for inquiry. Where traditional ethnography relies on the slow accumulation of knowledge through time, short-term ethnography utilizes methodological intensity. Researchers enter the field with a focused lens, employing interventionist techniques -such as digital ethnography, video recording, or collaborative activities- to quickly surface deep sensory and material insights. Similarly, "patchwork ethnography" utilizes fragmentary yet rigorous data and innovative field visits to resist the "fixity, holism, and certainty" typically demanded by the traditional publication process (Günel, Varma, & Watanabe, 2023).

On the other hand, the prevalence of rapid ethnography identified in this study might reflect a broader shift toward what Salverda (2019) describes as the practical necessity of maintaining access. However, the debate raised by Appel (2019) suggests that these shorter engagements may structurally limit the researcher's ability to move beyond the "corporate narrative". If the fieldwork duration is insufficient to move past the honeymoon phase of rapport, the resulting ethnography risks becoming a 'model for' corporate efficiency rather than a 'model of' critical social analysis.

Ultimately, the normalization of short-term ethnography in business settings does not inherently imply a deficit in rigor. Instead, it reflects an evolution within a social and economic milieu vastly different from the one that birthed the Malinowskian tradition. The ambition to "go beyond corporate narratives" might be understood more as a normative commitment than a strictly methodological one. While methodology dictates the *how* of data collection, often necessitating the "rapport" and "access" that Salverda (2019) defends as essential for any depth of insight, the decision to challenge or deconstruct the corporation's self-representation is a normative stance regarding the researcher's role in society. The tension identified in this study's mapping of short-term

fieldwork might concern not only whether researchers have *enough time*, but whether they have the *normative orientation* to treat the corporation as an object of critique.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the corpus was constructed using a title–abstract–keyword search strategy in Scopus, focusing on publications that explicitly self-identify as employing ethnography in business or organizational contexts. While this approach ensures conceptual consistency and transparency, it prioritizes precision over maximal recall and therefore excludes studies that may be ethnographic in practice but do not use the term "ethnography". Second, reliance on a single bibliographic database may underrepresent influential works published in non-indexed journals, which remain important outlets in anthropology. Third, the relatively limited size and multidisciplinary nature of the corpus constrain the interpretability of certain bibliometric indicators, particularly thematic network analyses. Finally, the analysis is restricted to academic publications and does not capture unpublished or proprietary ethnographic work conducted in applied or commercial settings.

Conclusions

Ethnography is a qualitative methodology that provides a unique perspective for analysing socio-cultural processes. Since businesses are fundamentally human institutions, applying this tool in business contexts is natural. Yet despite its suitability, the field lacks a consolidated, evidence-based overview of how ethnography is being used in business research. This article addresses that gap by systematically mapping the main trends in scientific production on business ethnography, offering the first comprehensive, cross-sectoral, and geographically informed analysis of the field's development.

Business ethnography facilitates the generation of insights into the interaction between culture, society, and business, making it applicable to a wide range of productive sectors. Our analysis indicates that the primary areas of application for ethnography are industry and manufacturing, information and communication technologies (ICTs), and professional services. Conversely, financial and banking services, construction, energy, transportation, and logistics have been minimally investigated, despite their strategic importance to the global economy. Identifying these gaps creates clear opportunities for targeted future research that can broaden the empirical and theoretical base of the field.

Geographically, there is a notable concentration of studies in Western Europe and North America, highlighting the need to expand research into other regions, particularly in the Global South. Addressing this imbalance is essential for producing knowledge that is not only academically robust but also culturally and contextually relevant to diverse business environments.

Regarding trends in scientific production, the field of business ethnography has shown sustained growth over the last two decades, demonstrating a clear multidisciplinary orientation. While Social Sciences and Business, Management, and Accounting continue to lead in academic output, there is increasing involvement from

disciplines such as Computer Science, Decision Sciences, and Engineering. These fields address current business-related challenges from their unique perspectives, utilizing ethnography as a complementary tool to their specific methodologies.

The thematic analysis reveals a variety of applications, ranging from traditional management topics, such as organizational culture and leadership, to more specialized areas in the technology sector, such as algorithms and software engineering. While there is a predominant trend toward applying ethnography in practical fields, anthropological research topics such as identity and culture continue to be present in the literature. However, areas of strong development within anthropological literature, such as gender, were not identified in the results.

One of the main issues regarding the expansion of ethnography lies in maintaining methodological rigor. The standardization of processes, commoditization, and reduced time spent on fieldwork are all significant concerns. Our study shows that while the predominant use of classical ethnographic methods (participant observation, interviews, and documentary analysis) is maintained, there is a trend toward shorter study periods. This situation poses methodological challenges that warrant careful consideration.

As possibilities for future research, at least three major areas have been identified: 1) Expanding business ethnography studies to underrepresented regions - not only to diversify the empirical record but also to challenge the geographic biases that shape current theoretical frameworks; 2) Exploring less-studied sectors such as financial services, construction, and energy, areas where ethnographic insights could complement dominant quantitative paradigms; and 3) Systematically analysing the implications of short-term ethnographic studies for research quality, a critical step for both academic and applied contexts.

In summary, this study contributes a comprehensive evidence base that can guide future research agendas, methodological debates, and practical applications of business ethnography. It demonstrates that the field is dynamic and growing, capable of adapting to diverse organizational and disciplinary contexts. By making visible the sectors, geographies, and themes where ethnography is thriving, and where it remains absent, our analysis provides a roadmap for enhancing its relevance, rigour, and global reach. The challenge now lies in leveraging this knowledge to consolidate business ethnography's position as an indispensable lens for understanding the cultural dimensions of economic life in an interconnected world.

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