

Chapter 5

Netnography: An Internet–Optimized Ethnographic Research Technique

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to impart understanding of Netnography as a new qualitative, interpretive research methodology that uses Internet-optimized ethnographic research techniques to study the online communities. As a method, Netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive than ethnography, and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews. It provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups. As a marketing research technique, Netnography uses the information publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups. Compared to traditional and market-oriented ethnography, Netnography is far less time consuming and elaborate. Owing to the relevance of studying sensitive research topics, in particular when access to informants is difficult, Netnography can be applied in an analysis of cross-consumer online communication.

INTRODUCTION

The internet has become one of the most important communication channels in the world in recent years due to the vast increase of people with ready access to it. In addition, this growing internet usage is creating wide changes in the consumer purchasing process. In the present scenario consumers seek unique experiences from their buyer-seller interactions (Vandenbosch and Dawar, 2002).

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They also look for the unique experiences of co-creating the product with producer-consumer engagement (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In short, consumers today, seek much more than a product or service, or even a brand or its company to satisfy them; they want an engagement, an experience, and an excitement. Experience suggests the elicitation of higher levels of emotion than those associated with either satisfaction or delight.

In the present scenario the researchers and practitioners in marketing are focusing their attention towards social networks (Dwivedi M, Shibu TP, Umashankar V. 2007). Events, such as interactions among a few customers, could result in higher level intensity such as development of online brand communities and therefore, sprouting behaviors can affect the ability to position a product. Today, analyzing the social networks has become a very important tool to understand the complexity and exchange patterns of markets. The advent of the Internet has revolutionized word of mouth communication, creating strong online communities allowing businesses to build customer loyalty to a degree that is difficult to obtain in today's business environment and to generate strong economic returns. Website strategy has evolved from a simple web presence to ensuring consumer purchases. These trends make it imperative for marketing researchers to understand the online consumer experience in terms of both quantity and quality of website visits (Maity, M., & Peters, C. L. O. 2005).

Experience is something singular that happens to an individual and which researchers cannot directly access (Caru and Cova, 2008). Therefore, researchers only interpret what their subjects have expressed orally, in writing or through their behaviour. Experience has become more and more important to marketing, but the methodologies typically used to research experiences, such as interviews and focus groups, have a number of drawbacks such as respondent inhibition (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Instead, verbatims are argued to be important to understanding the private nature of the experience to be studied. With the help of *Netnography*, Online Community research can be done by either actively integrating the members and ideas of the community or passively monitoring the community and integrating the gathered information, knowledge into the new product development process, (Kozinets, Robert V., 2002).

Another contrast with traditional and market-oriented ethnography is that *Netnography* is capable of being conducted in a manner that is entirely unobtrusive. Compared to focus groups and personal interviews, *Netnography* is far less obtrusive, conducted using observations of consumers in a context that is not fabricated by the marketing researcher. It also can provide information in a manner that is less costly and timelier than focus groups and personal interviews. *Netnography* provides marketing researchers with a window into naturally occurring behaviours, such as searches for information by, and communal word-of-mouth discussions between, consumers. Because it is both naturalistic and unobtrusive, an unprecedented unique combination not found in any other marketing research method- *Netnography* allows continuing access to informants in a particular online situation. This access may provide important opportunities for consumer-researcher and consumer-marketer relationships. Although notion of *Netnography* as a set of tools for exploring consumer behaviour online is not new, the potential of netnographic methods in market research and analysis is still largely undeveloped (Xun, J., & Reynolds, J. 2010)

Figure 1. *Netnography as a research technique*



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