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# Netnographic Analysis: Understanding Culture through Social Media Data

Robert V. Kozinets, Pierre-Yann Dolbec, and Amanda Earley

In the past two decades, participation in online conversations has grown from a relatively marginal activity of hackers, geeks, and early cyberculture members to a mainstream activity recognized and supported by mainstream businesses and media. Starting from tiny numbers of enthusiasts, over a billion people now use social media to communicate, create, and share information, opinions, and insights. Online social spaces have become increasingly recognized as important fields for qualitative social scientific investigation because of the richness and openness of its multifarious cultural sites. At the same time, online data present unique challenges for researchers, as it is voluminous, optionally anonymous, and often difficult to categorize. This chapter introduces readers to netnography, a technique for the cultural analysis of social media and online community data. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the distinctive cultural features of online, or social media, qualitative data and to overview, develop, and illustrate techniques for their rigorous analysis as they have been developed through the research approach of netnography.

## OVERVIEW

### *Defining Netnography*

Netnography is an established approach to qualitative research, whose name draws together the terms "Internet" and "ethnography" (see Kozinets, 2010). Netnography shares many of the characteristics of ethnography (see Gubrium and Holstein, Chapter 3, this volume), from which it has been adapted, in that it is a flexible approach that allows scholars to explore and explain rich, diverse, cultural worlds. Naturalistic in orientation, it approaches cultural phenomena in their local contexts, providing windows on naturally occurring behaviors. The output of a netnography can be descriptive as well as analytical and the method tends to generate rich, thick description through grounded interpretations (see Willig, Chapter 10, this volume), thereby

providing a detailed representation of the lived online experience of cultural members. Netnography also emphasizes the role of the "researcher-as-instrument" (Guba and Lincoln, 1981), and the immersion of the researcher into the computer-mediated context of study.

Netnography is also different from ethnography in many respects and thus requires a new set of skills (Kozinets, 2010). These differences emerge from the distinct nature of computer-mediated communications. The specificities of a rigorous and disciplined approach to netnography are organized around the entrée and data collection procedures, choices about field sites, decisions about the types of data to gather and analyze (see Marotzki et al., Chapter 31, this volume), the evaluation of the quality of netnographic research, and ethics, which we will review in the following paragraphs (Kozinets, 2002).

As netnography is a naturalistic method, its interpretations can be built from a combination of elicited and, more often, non-elicited data. These data emerge and are captured through the researcher's observation of and participation with people as they socialize online in regular environments and activities (Kozinets, 2010). Online cultural research is far less intrusive than traditional ethnography, as the online researchers can gather a vast amount of data without making their presence visible to culture members (Beaulieu, 2004; Kozinets, 2010). There are occasions where such non-participative activity (aka "lurking") is appropriate; however, it tends not to be not appropriate when the researcher is interested in the experience of participation in an online field site.

The field of social media offers several advantages rarely found in the traditional field. First, researchers generally have access to vast amounts of data, archived through forums and search engines. These resources can provide an unprecedented amount of information on cultural members, values, and structures, allowing researchers to better choose their field sites and plan their entrée (Kozinets, 2010). Second, ethnographers that employ interview methods (see Roulston, Chapter 20, this volume) can transcend geographic and time limitations by using asynchronous communication technologies such as email to conduct interviews. Third, netnography can leverage the connective power of the Internet and the search and organizing capabilities of contemporary search engines to offer accessibility and openness to a vast variety of virtual voices (see Marotzki et al., Chapter 31, this volume).

## *Characteristics of Netnographic Field Data*

The unique characteristics that distinguish netnographic data from face-to-face cultural data necessitate the ongoing development of new adaptations of ethnographic procedures. Some of the features we will briefly discuss in this chapter are: (1) increased field site accessibility; (2) increased communicative variety; (3) communication connectedness across multiple forms/fields; and (4) auto-archiving.

First, online fields offer dramatically increased field site accessibility. The explosion in online social worlds offers participants a virtually (although not absolutely or uniformly) borderless environment where geographically dispersed members can meet and communicate. Because these social fields are accessible to anybody with an Internet connection, it has been argued that the position of "ethnographer as sole and privileged witness [as found in ethnographies] may be more difficult to uphold as a subject position and authorial voice" in Internet-enabled social research (Beaulieu, 2004). On the Web and elsewhere, however, the difference between mere social observer and social scientist is clear. As Kozinets (2010: 113) elaborates, the difference is analogous to that between journalist and ethnographer – researchers adhere to respected, legitimate, and rigorous methodological proscriptions of their field, and in the development of research answers and theories, as data are analyzed and interpretive insights are structured and incorporated "into a known and respected body of codified knowledge."

The communicative variety of netnographic data refers to the many ways that researchers

and community members relate across multiple online and mobile platforms, as well as through face-to-face interactions. Where once there were face-to-face meetings and conversations, supplemented by letters and phone calls, researchers now must also consider blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook postings, Linkedin groups and meetings, and many other forms of social media meeting and communication. Moreover, the online interactions are themselves complex: they can happen both privately and publicly, both asynchronously and synchronously, over different time periods, and with numerous contributors (Ruhleder, 2000), as well as from a number of different site sources (e.g., corporate-owned forum or grassroots blog pages) and in different formats (e.g., textual, visual, audio).

Furthermore, there is added complexity in that these forms of communication are now often linked one to the other. Conversations are happening on multiple sites, between multiple community members, and recent technological advances make it possible to easily post and share content on multiple platforms. An entry might be cross-posted on a blog and a microblog, tagged in a geo-localized platform, shared on personal and professional social networks and social bookmarking services, talked about on independent and commercial-owned web forums, then re-blogged and ridiculed in an online video before ending up on national news. This marks a sharp contrast to both ethnographic work and earlier netnographic studies (e.g., Correll, 1995).

In order for a netnographer to understand the social circumstances of this activity, studying one manifestation of a particular message can often be insufficient. If a researcher attempted to mine, scrape, or download a descriptive posting on a web forum and thought that this posting "told the whole story," that researcher would be sadly mistaken. In order to gain a contextualized and nuanced cultural understanding of the social media phenomenon, the netnographer must be attuned to this multiform communicative connectedness, and be willing to follow multiple links to multiple sites and postings in order to gain a fuller and embedded understanding of the overlapping social worlds enacted through social media.

Finally, there is a constant and automatic saving, sorting, classifying, and archiving of all types of asynchronous – and much synchronous – media (e.g., a feed from the micro-blogging service Twitter) on the Internet, similar to having access to recordings of every public discourse, interaction, and social contact in a given real-world community (Kozinets, 2010). Archiving by search engines and specialized sites such as The Wayback Machine further this process. Again, this makes the Internet a very different site for ethnographic research compared to "real"-life social interactions, and requires levels of procedural adaptation.

## *Challenges of Netnographic Fieldwork*

In addition to these technical considerations, the structural characteristics of netnographic data present a number of interesting theoretical challenges. The first is ontological and concerns the somewhat false distinction between online and offline social "worlds." Because social worlds cut across complex networks of face-to-face and technologically mediated communications, the use of netnography, as with the use of any single method or focus, offers an incomplete view. Whereas before, community members would discuss face to face and over the phone, they are now supplementing their exchanges with online conversations on web forums and through emails (Wellman et al., 2001). Information search that happened offline is now radically altered and amplified by the Internet (Kayahara and Wellman, 2007). For example, the experience of preparing for childbirth might involve in-person conversations, doctor's visits, a baby shower, childbirthing classes, and other in-person activities.

However, if netnography offers only a partial view of many online–offline phenomena, the reverse is also true. That is, in the current environment – and increasingly in a rapidly

computerized and mobile Internet world – many social activities cut across both online and offline worlds (Garcia et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2010; Miller and Slater, 2000). For example, adjusting to a new college might involve sharing information via email, reading student and university blogs, getting information from websites, participating in online communities, and joining conversations on social networks (DeAndrea et al., 2012). Because the Internet is part of our everyday life, ethnographies of aspects of contemporary society should carefully consider the importance of studying related online behaviors and the social worlds of social media (Garcia et al., 2009; Miller and Slater, 2000). "Pure" netnographies, that is, netnography without an offline component, should be reserved for phenomena which are happening strictly in the online world, such as self-presentation on personal websites (Schau and Gilly, 2003) or online word of mouth (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Netnographic data also raise a number of epistemological and pragmatic questions. Because the Internet provides access to so much data, so easily, netnographers face the inherent challenge of data overload. Identification and classification of data can be challenging as the optional anonymity that the Web provides can lead to an absence of demographic markers. This seemingly convenient, easy, and anonymous datastream can also open a Pandora's box of ethical issues related to privacy, consent, and appropriate representation. Finally, although qualitative methods like netnography are contextually embedded, researchers often are drawn or directed to collect corroborating evidence in order to generalize findings or make more them more transferable to diverse contexts (Kozinets, 2002). The next section begins the discussion of netnographic procedures developed to address these important challenges.

## NETNOGRAPHIC PROCEDURES

Netnography is a relatively new method, and analysis techniques thus far have been developed in relation to analogous procedures in ethnography. Here, we provide explicit guidelines for adapting face-to-face data collection and analysis techniques to the new contingencies of computer-mediated cultural communications. We will work from five essential ethnographic considerations: (1) preparing for data collections and cultural entrée; (2) collecting and creating the data; (3) performing ethical research; (4) conducting an insightful and trustworthy analysis; and (5) representing the data analysis in a meaningful and appropriate manner. The section that follows will provide an illustration of how these procedures can be applied to actual social media data.

### *Netnographic Sites and Entrée*

There are many different sites of culture on the Internet, and each one can be explored using the netnographic approach. Kozinets' list of the main types of netnographic field sites includes bulletin boards, chat rooms, playspaces (where videogame and other game play occurs), virtual worlds, lists and web-rings (a largely defunct form now replaced by blogrolls) (Kozinets, 2002), and blogs, wikis, audiovisual sites, social content aggregators, and social networking sites (Kozinets, 2010). It is crucial for researchers to be attuned to the format of different online field sites as it influences the "types, forms and structures of online communication" found within it (Kozinets, 2010: 87), and the possible roles that can be assumed by users (e.g., being the reader of a blog, a follower of a Twitter poster, a member of a forum, or a friend on a social networking site).

Research questions addressed by netnographic studies may relate to a phenomenon that exists in both offline and online worlds; that can only be experienced virtually; or that concerns the very nature and structure of web-mediated communications. When choosing a field site to study, researchers should favor communities that (1) are more "research question relevant"; (2) have a "higher traffic of postings"; (3) have larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) have more detailed or

descriptively rich data; and (5) have more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question (Kozinets, 2002: 63). We suggest identifying research topics, or a set of research questions that will help in pinpointing relevant online sites; studying the sites and their participants to understand the social dynamics at play; and finding out if the community has been "tapped out" (Kozinets, 2010: 79) by other researchers or "turned off" by inconsiderate researchers in the past. Along the way, never assume you know more than the community about its own culture. Most importantly, pay attention to the kinds of social data that are available (textual, visual, audiovisual, graphic, and so on) and get prepared to collect and organize them.

Making a successful cultural entrée into these field sites and with their members requires understanding the data while collecting them, and, even more importantly, understanding and being sensitive to the needs and functioning of the social media community. Because netnography is attuned to the cultural realities of living, breathing communities of communicating people, netnographic research requires an initial and deepening cultural understanding of the community. As in any social settings, online gathering "places" have particular histories, social structures, codes of etiquettes, particular ways of speaking, and unique rituals and identities. An entrée can make or break the interactions that will follow with a community; a researcher can be rejected if the researcher does not understand the customs of the community he or she is talking to (e.g., Kozinets, 2010: 77).

Given the abundance of "intelligence" data available on the Web, researchers should conduct background research to ease the entrée. One example is "lurking" – a form of online reconnaissance – to gain information on the community before making the entrée, an opinion shared by other researchers (e.g., Shoham, 2004). Lurking should only be the first step of a netnographic study, though: Beaulieu (2004) maintains that "lurking" netnographers can miss parts of the phenomenon that are not publicly visible and Kozinets (2010) emphasizes the importance of engagement and participation in cultural worlds.

Once background research is complete and the various types of data and their approximate contents are identified and accommodated, active participation can move to the forefront. Participation in a netnography allows researchers to experience what it feels like to be a community member. Here it may be helpful to think of Walstrom's (2004) term "participant experience," offered as a counterpoint to the traditional but misleading ethnographic term "participant observer."

From the perspective of data collection, it is important for this participation to be captured in field notes, screen captures, recordings, and other permanent records. When performed well, ethnographic participation online enables enhanced cultural understanding, the confirmation of interpretation, and new opportunities to recast the research enterprise as collaboration rather than appropriation. Ideally, the researcher's participation should provide some benefit to the community, for example, by posting something that is useful and/or thought provoking and sharing it with a comment. Alternatively, a researcher could begin as a participant in a particular site and become a culture member before starting to study this community. As the introspective approach of "auto-ethnography" (Hayano, 1979) morphs into "auto-netnography" (Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009), pre-existing cultural membership can smooth entrée into an unnoticeable and much more personally complicated introspective event (e.g., Cherny, 1999).

## UNDERSTANDING NETNOGRAPHIC DATA AND DATA COLLECTION

Three general types of data are available for collection in netnography: archival data, elicited data, and field note data. Archival data comprise anything the researcher can gather from the Web that is not a product of his or her involvement to create or prompt the creation of data. These types of data can constitute a "cultural baseline," serving as a portrait

of what the community was doing before the researcher made his or her incursion into that social media environment. From this point, the researcher seeks to deepen his or her knowledge of the cultural context (see Kozinets, 2010: 104). These types of so-called observational data can be difficult to find, depending upon the specificity of the topic, but once found are relatively straightforward to access, and can be gathered at a very low cost. Importantly, text (whether in text, image, or video format) also has context. Beyond the analysis of the text, researchers can also look at the way that a webpage and postings are formatted as a type of conversation between various users. They might analyze the pictures that people use to represent themselves, the way that they describe themselves, the various signs and signals that are used, and the interactions between those.

Numerous ways exist to record online data. The two most fundamental techniques are: (1) to copy and paste the content of a forum post, for example, into word processing software files such as a Microsoft Word document; and (2) to capture a screenshot of data using a program such as Windows 7's snipping tool or the Apple Grab utility. It is also possible to record in real time a researcher's visit to a particular website through programs such as Camtasia. It may be tempting for researchers to look into programs such as HTTrack Website Copier that allow the researcher to archive the full content of websites and forums, which seemingly provides an interesting alternative to copy–pasting text content, and/or screengrabbing pages. However, the temptation to "mine" large amounts of data can overshadow real-time engagement with the cultural context. Although greatly facilitating data collection, automatic methods can thus can create a barrier to understanding. Such tools must be understood deeply and used judiciously in coordination with actual, real-time, engaged, confusing, all-too-human participation in the social media community; its conversations; its people; and its temporal unfolding. Archival data can be present in the form of text, such as messages exchanged on a forum; in visual forms, such as the layout and logos of websites, pictures of members of a social networking sites, or images of avatars in online worlds; by way of audio, such as songs exchanged on forums; and through video, such as webcam conversations and user-generated videos.

Elicited data refer to content that is co-created by the researcher and members of the social media community through processes of social interaction. This includes the products of online interviewing, whether by asynchronous modes of communication (e.g., email, forums) or (quasi-)synchronous ones such as chat and video calling. Early literature on eliciting data through online channels raised concerns about how the medium itself can shape the interaction. In the now-classic work from the Dark Ages of netnographic inquiry, Markham (1998: 62–75) notes that textual online interviews (e.g., in chat rooms) limit the information that can be gathered from non-verbal cues. Moreover, as typing is usually significantly slower and more deliberate than text-based interviews, it could limit participant spontaneity (Catterall and Maclaran, 2002). At the same time, netnographers can use these structural characteristics to their advantage. Like conversations in the traditional, face-to-face field, the synchronous, real-time format of online chatting can provide the researcher with quick insight into a cultural phenomenon and can even evolve into an informal interview. The deliberate nature of email exchange lends itself well to the goals of formal interviews, as it can enhance reflexivity, foster a sense of intimacy, and, if time is taken, deepen rapport (Kozinets, 2010; see McCracken, 1988, for methodological recommendations regarding offline interview methods). A high-bandwidth audiovisual interview can be offered, if the interviewer and interviewee possess a strong Internet connection, to simulate a face-to-face interview. As it restores access to participant body language, video chat provides a significant advantage over the well-established technique of telephone interviewing.

The third and final type of data associated with a netnographic research project are field note data, which are generated directly by the

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researcher for the purpose of research recording, reflection, and analysis. These data are not shared with the social media community, although they may contain captures of data such as texts, screenshots, moving images, and so on. In order to analyze the important transitions involved in cultural entrée and acculturation, netnographic researchers should begin recording reflective field notes as early in the research process as possible, ideally as soon as a project is initiated. These notes should continue through the search for a specific site, adding notes when experiencing the community, contacting and interacting with culture members, or even simply when thinking and reflecting about the research project. Field notes should document the journey of the netnographer from an outsider to an inside cultural member. Although netnographers have many opportunities to automatically capture online images and actions, these actions are by no means a substitute for internal reflection, the capture of in-the-moment impressions and experiences, and the deep culture-bound introspective analysis that marks all strong anthropological and sociological ethnography.

With these three types of data in mind, along with the diversity of communication media they may involve, it is important to remember that *netnographic data collection is not simply one thing, but now offers a range and continuum of different offerings with different benefits, drawbacks, and concomitant tradeoffs*. This holds for almost every element of conducting netnographic research. The online world has become enormously complex and variegated, and netnographic research approaches have followed suit.

## ETHICS IN NETNOGRAPHY

Research ethics (see Mertens, Chapter 35, this volume) are a complex and difficult topic in netnographic exploration. As with all social inquiry, ethical netnographic practice is grounded in the principle of informed consent, and consideration of potential benefits and risks to individuals and communities. Since social media blend the public and private into a novel hybrid form, netnography demands new thinking and methodological innovation on issues of risk and privacy.

The online representation of identity is one factor that affects how we think about consent and the potential for harm, especially for elicited data. Some researchers approach the issue by requesting legal names and signed consent forms, or by combining online and offline methods. Although knowing a user's "real-life" name and having access to more information about offline lives may enhance perceptions of netnography's credibility, this bears with it the same responsibility for protecting identities faced by ethnographers, interviewers, and all other social researchers who obtain data from human subjects.

For archived data, the researcher may approach web content as published content. Although information posted publicly on the Web is technically published, and subject to criticism and quotation with citation, netnographers should consider the ethical issues inherent in quoting directly from online sources (Bruckman, 2006; Kozinets, 2002). Although a web user is responsible for the consequences of publicly posting information on the Internet (either with an original name or a pseudonym), re-publication or citation in an academic publication may have unexpected consequences for the individual and/or the community. For example, it may be unsettling or injurious to the individual if the quote appears with the researcher's critical reading every time the individual's online alias is entered into a major search engine.

As such, when harm is likely, netnographers follow the ethnographic tradition of pseudonymization, protecting individuals' names – both legal and assumed. Many web users have valued pseudonymous identities that they have invested quite a deal of effort into creating and protecting, and netnographers should always be careful to treat these identities as if they were legal identities, creating further pseudonyms when human subjects need protection. Nevertheless, using real names may be appropriate in some cases. For example, an

art historian using netnography may need to cite the blogs of famous art critics or artists.

From a legal perspective, three legitimate privacy concerns may arise in the course of such netnographic study. One is the use of online information found in "semi-private" web spaces. Are all members of a particular online community bound by a Terms of Use agreement that defines the forum as a de facto private space? Do users have a reasonable expectation of privacy? Does the group stipulate other restrictions on how the content may be used? Generally, groups that anyone can join are still considered to be public, but the netnographer should be careful with any Terms of Use agreements that are "signed" when signing up. The second privacy issue goes hand in hand with earlier discussions of anonymity, pseudonymity, and confidentiality. Whether or not a netnographer uses a poster's real name or "real pseudonym" remains an ethical question, not a legal one, as the information is publicly published under that name. In addition to privacy laws, copyright laws may come into play when a researcher wants to publish a picture, quote, or other material. From an international level, this issue is so complex and dynamic that questions are best handled by experts (e.g., a university's lawyers advising about local copyright restrictions and fair use guidelines) on a case-by-case basis.

## NETNOGRAPHY IN ACTION: A BRIEF ILLUSTRATION

In principle, the analysis of qualitative data yielded by a netnography will proceed in a fashion very similar to that of any other comparable types of qualitative data. As we mentioned earlier, netnography shares the inductive and iterative aspects of ethnography. Because of the nature of social media and online communications, netnography places the field site and research participants within easy access of the researcher. Thus the collection of data and their analysis are even more likely than they are with other methods to become blurred into a single ongoing process. Add to this the ubiquity and variety of search analytic engines and the convenience of qualitative data management software and coding programs (see Gibbs, Chapter 19, this volume), and we have the opportunity to automate many elements of the netnographic data collection and analysis. Although ethnography requires the researcher to become a finely tuned instrument (see Gubrium and Holstein, Chapter 3, this volume), the use of such software risks reducing the researcher to a mere button-pusher who finds the preprogrammed output of various web-mining and content analysis programs sufficient as either the outcome or primary basis of an interpretation. To avoid this, we advocate an "old-fashioned," hands-on approach to netnographic data analysis. Although netnography uses some of the most contemporary data available, and benefits from the most recent technological developments, this approach to data analysis grounds the researchers in the basics of inductive (see Reichertz, Chapter 9, this volume) and reflexive analysis (see May and Perry, Chapter 8, this volume).

We have four important prescriptions to guide researchers in conducting netnographic data analysis. The first core principle of quality netnography is that of "ethnographic siting" (see Gubrium and Holstein, Chapter 3, this volume). This means that netnographers should go site specific, initially at least, concentrating on a small number of postings or a very constrained data set in order to gain a deep cultural sense of "what is going on" in that particular social space. From there, the analysis can broaden in scope as well as deepen. The second tenet of rigorous netnographic analysis is to undertaken cultural analysis (see Winter, Chapter 17, this volume) while engaged as a participant in a manner appropriate to other cultural participants or community members. This is the rule of "ethnographic engaging." The third maxim is that of "ethnographic communicating," where communications are, at least initially, experienced, processed, and understood exactly as cultural members experience them. This means

that they should be analyzed and viewed in their natural "real-text" format rather than experienced through the filters of some language processor or compressive software engine. The final recommended netnographic convention is to allow "ethnographic timing" to unfold, such that messages and posts are experienced, read, interpreted, and analyzed in real time, as they become available, rather than all at once.

As with ethnography, the purpose of netnographic data analysis is to organize the collected products of participation and observation into a rigorous, meaningful, and useful form of research output, such as an article, a report, a presentation, or even a book. The data will likely include various downloaded textual, graphical, photographic, audio, and audiovisual files, screen captures, online interview transcripts, and reflective field notes. In this section, we present coding and hermeneutic approaches to analyzing these materials. As researchers who frequently work with textual data, we find a combination of these two approaches to be optimal, but other methods may be more appropriate for other types of netnographic data. For example, netnographers working in image or video-heavy field sites may want to reference the chapters of this handbook that explicate semiotic and visual studies approaches (see Banks, Chapter 27, and Knoblauch et al., Chapter 30, this volume).

Coding is a qualitative data analysis method commonly used by sociological researchers. Here, "open coding" is arguably the most popular approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; see Thornberg and Charmaz, Chapter 11, this volume). Open coding begins when the researcher labels and categorizes data by "emic," field-level meanings, and then groups these categories into other abstract categories. The ultimate goal of open coding is to reach a theoretically relevant understanding of the phenomena of interest. Netnographers can organize many different types of data with the same codes. For example, a photograph, a scanned drawing, a blog entry, the format of a webpage, a few seconds of a YouTube video, the color of text in a posting, and the name of someone's avatar could possibly all be coded with the same term.

The "grounded theory" that emerges from coding is tested as new data are collected and analyzed; indeed, data may be collected specifically for that purpose. Because netnography allows such easy access to data, and often offers up large amounts of data, such cross-checking is facilitated in a rather unprecedented manner. Comparisons (see Palmberger and Gingrich, Chapter 7, this volume) look for convergence and divergence among the coded data and the categories. Generalizations try to explain the occurrences of the data and are used to construct new theories.

Simultaneous with such inevitably micro but effectively piecemeal approaches are more macro and holistic approaches that seek a kind of transcendent interpretation. As consumer researcher Susan Spiggle (1994: 497) describes them, these interpretations are like a type of decoding that "occurs as a gestalt shift and represents a synthetic, holistic, and illuminating grasp of meaning." Another way to conceptualize this form of insightful reading of texts is the notion of hermeneutics, where larger order conceptual readings are garnered from readings of the parts of the text in light of the text as a whole. In a netnography, this "text" can encompass particular sites; particular forms of social media; the Web or Internet itself; interview data about online interaction; the researcher's ongoing experience with online media; and a multitude of different types of communications such as email, blog posts, comments, ratings, photographs, and videos.

In netnography, coding (see Thornberg and Charmaz, Chapter 11, this volume) and hermeneutic interpretation (see Wernet, Chapter 16, this volume) may overlap in a variety of interesting ways. Rarely do hermeneutic insights simply burst into being like a light illuminating a dark room. Because netnographers must approach field sites as participants as well as observers, their interpretations of online communications and communities will emerge gradually, as they build up the cultural codes to make sense of virtual social spaces.

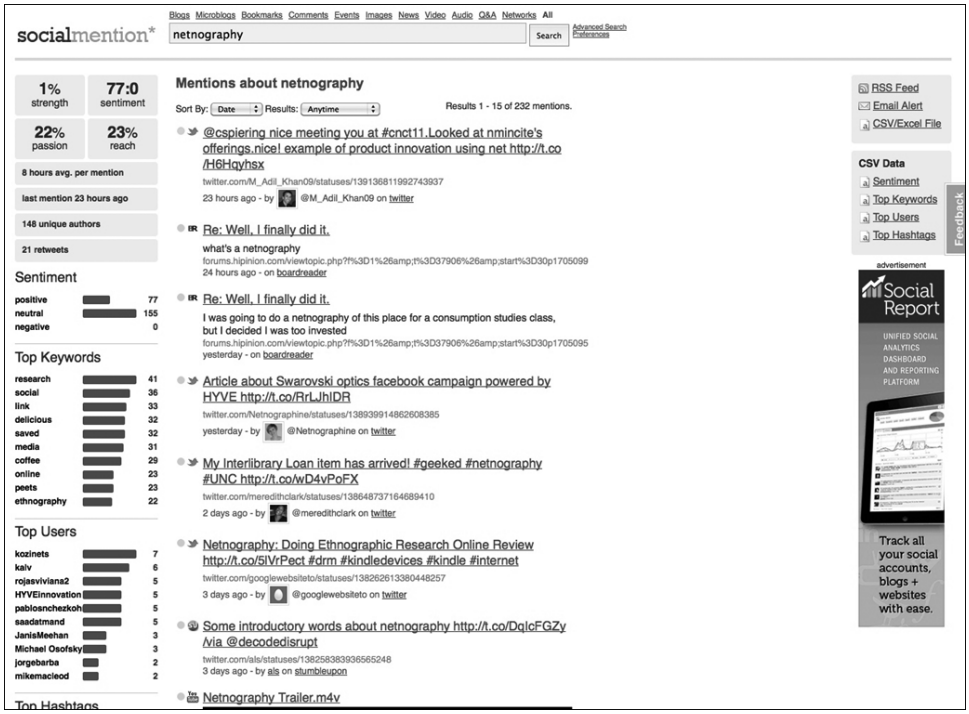


**Figure 18.1**

*Source*: socialmention.com website search using search term "netnography", conducted April 2013

In order to demonstrate how coding and hermeneutic analysis can be utilized in netnographic data analysis, we offer a short example that involves both coding and hermeneutic interpretation. The 64-word sample text was drawn from a discussion about netnography on a LinkedIn group dedicated to netnography. It was located through a search of the term "netnography" on a public, free (but ad-supported) semantic search engine named "Social Mention" (which can be found at socialmention.com). The search engine looks for mentions of the word netnography across a range of domains on the Internet, including blogs, micro-blogs, bookmarks, comments, news stories, video and other forums and formats. The software attempts to recognize positive, neutral, and negative sentiments in the mention of netnography, and it also looks at the co-occurrence of the term and other terms. As Figure 18.1 shows, Social Mention classifies the term as having very little strength, but positive sentiment and reasonable passion.

Social Mention and other semantic search engines are very useful to netnographers because they can help to identify where to find particular mentions of topics or terms. In this case, the Social Mention output led us to a Twitter tweet, which had an embedded link that directed us to a discussion thread that was useful to use as an example of netnographic data analysis. The post, written by a consultant and trainer from the UK, asked the following question:

> Does anybody do small scale, thick description Netnography using naturally formed communities on the net? I'm seeing a lot of stuff about Netnography that is getting hard to distinguish from social media listening. I want to know if people do research as observers / participant observers in naturally formed communities (not supported by brands) and if so, how you deal with the ethical issues?

Because of the space constraints of this chapter, we are prevented from entering into extreme detail; however, we can code a range of different topics from this posting. They include: research terms (small scale, thick description); method concerns (observers / participant observers, ethical issues); and distinctions for research and researchers (hard to distinguish, naturally formed). From these we can proceed to some higher order categories or theories, noting that some researchers are seeking to distinguish netnographies from other techniques such as "social media listening" and that the terms "naturally formed communities" may also be powerful and prevalent in setting up this distinction.

From these coding and higher order categorizations, our hermeneutic interpretation can build out a more general theory that attends to commercialization in the sphere of social media. It might see this posting as an authenticating strategy that seeks to establish the boundaries of authenticity and to link them in a notional space with morality, ethics, and particular research practices. The poster views organically developed communities as different in some sense from those which are cultivated by companies or brands, and simultaneously relates the use of "small scale, thick description" ethnographic techniques to the study of these communities as a way to distinguish a particular kind of research and researcher as more authentic than others.

In this way, coding and hermeneutics are complementary techniques that can help to illumine various aspects of even short postings such as this one. Of course, such interpretations often require an insider's depth of knowledge, linguistic terms, and understanding, and such a deep understanding can only take place through prolonged engagement and immersion in a culture over a prolonged period of time.

There are a vast variety of different approaches we can take to analyze netnographic data. Another method that can be used to glean insights for analysis is to use word clouds. In Figure 18.2, we went to the Wikipedia entry on "netnography," which is

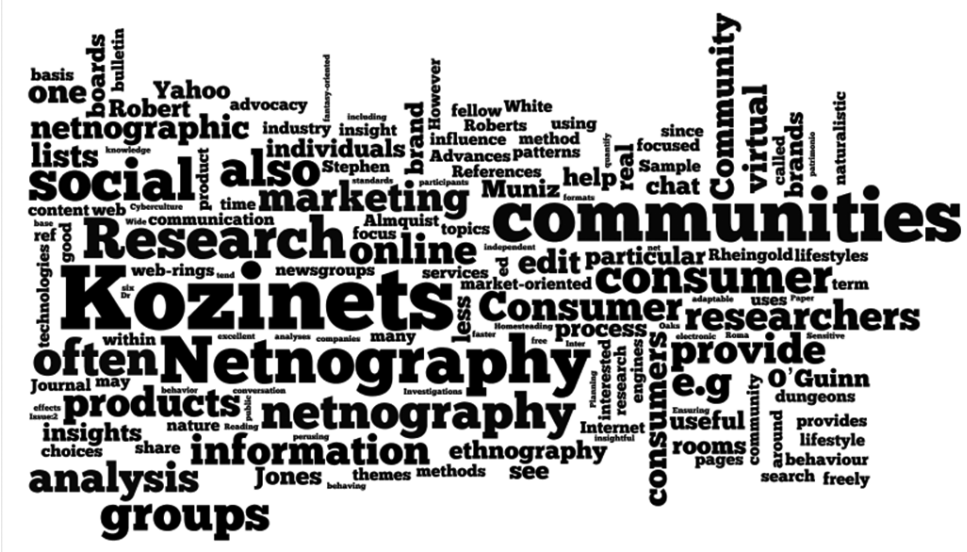


**Figure 18. 2**

*Source*: output from wordle.com input of wikipedia.com entry on "netnography", conducted April 2013

the top listing on the Google search engine when we searched for that term. We selected the entire article, and then pasted it into the free word cloud generator "Wordle" (available at wordle.com). The same method could of course be used to generate word clouds for entire postings, threads, or much larger sets of words. We can then proceed to analyze the output. The first author's name shows up as the largest word in the cloud, which perhaps suggests how closely the method is still associated with its pioneer and chief advocate (see also Kozinets, 2012). Other words that are large and significant (besides netnography) are communities, social, research, and consumer. The terms are still largely descriptive, which is to be expected in an encyclopedia entry such as Wikipedia, although the inclusion of the term "communities" underscores the importance of the role of online community studies, and the use of consumer also indicates that the term is still largely associated with business schools and consumer research. It may be interesting to note some important words which do not appear prominently in the word cloud, such as marketing, business, method, digital, and anthropology. Obviously, these analyses are brief, rather superficial, and illustrative only. They invite considerably deeper exploration than our space constraint allows.

## MOVING FORWARD

We conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of some of the challenges, strengths, and new directions that accompany the analysis of netnographic data. Many challenges have previously been identified in past literature on the topic, such as the anonymity of data; the difficulty of maintaining research ethics in a space that is both public and private; the nature of cyberculture; and its technological mediation of social communications (see, e.g., Kozinets, 2002; 2010; Langer and Beckman, 2005). We focus our closing comments on several overlapping areas: anonymity, legal issues, data overload, and the emergence of new social media forms.

Public perceptions about anonymity on the Internet have changed dramatically over the past decade or so, and with them netnography must also change. The Internet is now mainstream. Documentation mechanisms have emerged in many web forums, with the goal of verifying relevant parts of a person's identity, character, or behavior. Perhaps most importantly, increasingly, online interactions are no longer anonymous. Social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn strongly and successfully encourage people to use their real or legal names, often going so far as demanding it within Terms of Use agreements. These identities are further validated as users "friend" others they know in real life, and activity in the physical world becomes fodder for conversation in the world of social networking. The integration of those websites with newspaper and magazine sites connects commentary to one's social network identity, furthering this trend. Portable technologies and services like Twitter allow advanced documentation of what is going on in "real life." There is a clear tension between the forces favoring anonymous interactions and the structures demanding or encouraging its decline. In short, the once more demarcated lines between offline and online identities are disappearing. However, the netnographer now must pay much more close attention to the limitations he or she has to conduct research on social networks such as Facebook that are governed by restrictive terms of use, and where social media community data are, in some sense, "owned" by a corporation and bought, sold, and utilized mainly for its own private benefit.

Since social media present an overt risk of data overload, netnographic procedures suggest that converging concentration and centric sampling and analysis be used to cope with copious amounts of data. This is the netnographic edge, in which the "researcher-as-instrument" demonstrates what a trained anthropologist can do that a sophisticated data-mining program cannot. To cope with overwhelming quantities of data, netnographers must clearly establish the boundaries of the phenomenon being studied. These boundaries

should link the analysis, in an iterative and inductive manner, of the data collected with the research focus. As in any qualitative research project, the data collection should be rigorous and follow established methodological guidelines. Findings should be grounded and emerge from the data. Using a small data set does not equate to purposively sampling data to confirm a researcher's feeling of what is going on in the field site. If the researcher plans to analyze the data set by hand, Kozinets (2010) recommends limiting the amount of data to no more than 1000 double-spaced pages of text. If the researcher is using qualitative data analysis software, this amount can be increased to 5000 pages, but the analyst should proceed with caution and not lose sight of the social site's forest for the QDA's categorical trees (QDA: Qualitative Data Analysis – see Gibbs, Chapter 19, this volume).

Our advice is to think carefully about what kinds of data and how much data are necessary for a given project. Consider whether the project would be better served with more depth, analyzing the comments and any linked content for a certain time period. It may also be instructive to think about the level of analysis and the boundaries of the community. Are you interested in comparing organizations or websites, or is your community defined by a particular group of users? How much data, and of what kind, are required to learn about the community of interest? Clear definitions of the community and strategies for collecting the necessary data should be established at the outset and reviewed regularly throughout the project, to ensure that the data are appropriate and not overwhelming (Kozinets, 2010). Throughout, be sure to start with the most promising areas of online content, in the event that even these amounts of data are overwhelming.

However, if you decide that your research project requires you to sample widely or broadly, and that large amounts of social media data are necessary, there are many useful tools to help address some of the organizational issues associated with data overload. Depending upon the project, software for automatically downloading web content may be helpful. For others, however, this may produce data that require a considerable quantity of manual cleaning. Regardless of the archiving method, keep in mind that online data often contain large quantities of noise, spam, or otherwise unusable material. Website searches often yield documents that are not relevant. Online community discussion boards frequently feature "off-topic" discussion that may or may not be essential to your analysis. However, automated QDA software (often abbreviated to CAQDAS or Computer-Assisted or Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Systems or Software; see Lewins and Silver, 2007) such as ATLAS.ti or NVivo (see Gibbs, Chapter 19, this volume) offer assistance in coding, searching, classifying, and organizing large sets of qualitative data.

There are a range of different ways to judge the quality of a netnography as a tool for revealing insights from social media and online interactions. Kozinets (2010) follows the history of ethnography and its corresponding quality judgments and evaluations and suggests a pliable set of criteria that can be adapted to achieve many rhetorical research purposes. Some of these criteria contradict one another, indicating the need for a custom-made evaluative solution to be devised by the researcher, in the spirit of ethnographic research. The arrows in this evaluative quiver for judging the quality of a netnographic analysis are that the analysis is internally coherent; that it follows accepted procedures; that it recognizes relevant literature and approaches; that it follows from and links to the data; that the ideas provide new understandings; that a sensitizing connection is gained; that a believable sense of culture is presented; that the analysis is open to alternative interpretations; that the text inspires social action; and that the analysis accounts for the interaction of online and offline social interactions (see Kozinets, 2010, for more detail). These 10 criteria offer netnographic researchers a pragmatic "toolkit" orientation for the evaluation of their data analysis.

In summary, the chapter offers various sets of advice that may lead the researcher to high-quality social media data analysis, and provides some best practices advice for conducting

netnographic studies and netnographic data analysis. At its core, netnographic data analysis is about maintaining the cultural quality of the social media phenomenon through the careful consideration of the researcher's own role and social intelligence throughout the process of online social scientific research.

## FURTHER READING


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