



RESEARCH PAPER

Evolving Netnographic Research Design: Addressing Issues, Challenges, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

This review paper attempts to understand the evolution of netnography as a method, highlighting its methodological base, consequences/implications, and prospective future. Netnography is a qualitative research method deriving from ethnography, anthropology, and sociology. Netnographic research evaluates online communities whereby data collected interprets the actions of members within these groups. It places ethnography historically as rooted in cultural anthropology and evolving within the fast-changing digital world. In other words, ethical considerations regarding obtaining informed consent and protecting participant privacy are essential, and data authenticity and representation questions are discussed. In particular, the field needs to deal with methodological challenges, such as dealing with information overload and staying up-to-date on technological developments regarding analysis. This paper describes the untapped potential for netnography to develop research domain areas, especially in health and nursing, tourism, and marketing. Emphasis is placed on technological integration through big data analytics and artificial intelligence to improve netnographic research. Hybrid methodologies and the construction of solid ethical frameworks are also recognized as critically important to developing the field. The example of health research, tourism, and marketing case studies serves as a model for the benefits and utility of netnography in offering rich interpretive context. Conclusively, the paper highlighted some directions for future research on netnography, e.g., advanced analytical tools, further evolving of ethical guidelines and cross-disciplinary applications. This thorough investigation highlights that studying digital cultures and consumer behavior in the age of digital culture needs netnography as a sophisticated research instrument for interconnected purposes.

KEYWORDS Netnography, Online Communities, Digital Ethnography, Ethical Considerations, Methodological Challenges

Introduction

Netnography is a research method specifically designed to study online communities and other forms of computer-mediated social interaction. Netnography is a form of participant-observation research in online spaces to understand the behaviors, interactions, and meanings made by digital tribes (social groups with some degree of characteristics) or clusters of consumers with common interests in similar contexts (Kozinet, 1998). Since they rely on the internet as an extensive data pool, researchers can use this method to study phenomena related to digital or online communities, such as consumer behaviors and practices in virtual community spaces. The technique has been developed to incorporate various methods, whether passive observation or active engagement, depending on the nature of the research questions and the ethics involved. (Costello, McDermott, & Wallace, 2017).

Netnography has an advantage over other present study methodologies as this method could offer a deeper tabletop view of online conducts and cultures. Nowadays, with increasingly intense daily digital interactions, it is crucial for marketing and sociology, often researching overall overviews, to better understand how these online communities work. Netnography provides a less expensive, more nimble way of capturing internet user interaction within the rapidly developing digital arena. This method is helpful for researchers trying to limit their dates with all happenings on the web (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

This paper deals with the multiple dimensions of netnography and aims to address its challenges, problems, and future potential. This article takes a comprehensive approach to explore the methodological considerations, ethical dilemmas, and practical application of netnography. More specifically, this paper has the following objectives: first and foremost, we identify and discuss the main difficulties of performing netnography, such as ethical aspects, authenticity in data collection, or engaging participants; secondly, it highlights methodological dilemmas faced by researchers when undertaking research with the use of netnographic procedures for example information overloads, technological issues to overcome, complexity in analysis and finally examines prospects for further development. Hence, the paper seeks to extend our understanding of netnography and help contribute towards improved theoretical robustness by addressing these objectives.

Historical Context

Netnography was created by Robert Kozinets in the late 1990s as a more modern adaptation of traditional ethnographic methods for an online world. Traditional ethnography, as derived from the anthropological field study method, has involved immersive fieldwork, where researchers live among and observe a community in order to understand its culture, practices, and social interactions. As powerful as the method proved to be in offline, physical communities, its limitations became just as evident when applied to this emerging new world that was misbehaving on an unprecedented scale.

New online social models and the rapid spread of new methods of forming communities would come from eras before — but not yet at the time, most sociology studies involving large samples were designed. Kozinets identified this unfulfilled niche and created netnography for the systematic research on these online communities. While ethnography is a method of extended participant observation (Agar, 1996), in its broadest sense, netnography refers to the same principles but applied directly or indirectly via online communities where relationships live as text-based interactions embedded with images and video rather than face-to-face (Kozinets, 1998). This evolution allowed researchers to explore the complex and dynamic nature of online cultures and behaviors, providing insights that were previously inaccessible through traditional ethnographic method

Netnography has been transformed and expanded as the years have gone by to include all types of techniques that respond not only to the advantages but also to some problems that are proper of researching digital environments. Netnography researchers have attempted to consider both works done by other scholars in the field and those who advocate for greater participation of participant observers in this particular brand of ethnographic research. (Costello, McDermott, & Wallace, 2017). The approach has been used in different domains such as marketing, health or education, and even tourism, showing that board games are still relevant due to the rise of digital support (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

Methodological Foundations

Netnography draws from the following principles and techniques to formulate a solid methodological scaffolding for studying digital cultures. Methodologically, netnography is inspired by the methodology of cultural anthropology and follows many

these complexities while ensuring participants are adequately informed about the study and its purposes.

One of the significant ethical considerations in netnography is respecting the privacy and anonymity of online participants. The digital nature of data collection allowing these usernames or pseudonyms to be associated with the user responsible is equally detrimental as inadvertently releasing said personal information. Netnographic researchers must carefully anonymize the data to protect the identities of participants. This involves removing identifiable information and being cautious about how data is presented in publications to prevent indirect identification (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Ensuring ethical data use and safeguarding participants' privacy is crucial to maintaining trust and integrity in netnographic research.

Along with the ethical concerns, Validity and Reliability Issues must be considered carefully in netnography. One of the most considerable challenges for netnographers is ensuring that the data they collect from online sources is fundamental. This can open up a range of issues shaped by the anonymity and fluidity of online identities — anything from fake personae to people inflating who they are in real life or flat-out duplicitous behavior. This means researchers must be vigilant and ask tough questions about the veracity of issues. While validation is an essential dimension of all ethnographic research, traditional face-to-face interactions can also provide better cues regarding authenticity than the text and multimedia images that netnographers deal with (Kozinets, 1998). This is incredibly challenging for researchers since it forces them to place more intimate trust in their data; essentially, they have to "trust the cloud" from an analytical standpoint.

A second important area of concern is how evidence from online interactions is taken and represented. Because online written communications involve text, it is easy to see how they can lead to misunderstandings (though remember there are instances when people's intent may not be as innocent). Moreover, the context of online interactions may differ and have far-ranging consequences for what data means. However, researchers also have to be aware of the cultural and contextual complexities of online communities for describing participant's behaviors or interactions in a wrong manner (Hine, 2000). Netnographic research emphasizes the importance of representing online interactions faithfully (Kozinets, 2015).

Another issue that challenges netnographers is how one discovers and becomes accepted in online communities. Online communities are distinct from in-person ones, where researchers can show up and begin participating in making history, as online people may be more protective or wary of outsiders. Nevertheless, some are closed and require membership to get involved, making it harder for researchers. The temporal instability of online groups also means that communities may change more rapidly, making establishing a whole system over time quite difficult (Costello et al., 2017). To access these digital spaces, netnographers have to work hard for their informants or regular sites read them and be able to trust.

There is, however, an ever-present quandary between active (participatory) and passive (non-participant observer netnography. Active netnography — the researcher enters online conversations and events, commenting on discussions with other community members. Though this method can yield significantly more informed and detailed data, it also risks changing the behavior of members within a community so that they produce what looks valuable while introducing researcher bias. In contrast, passive netnography omits researcher interaction in observations, resulting in the least interventional method of data collection and recording (Costello et al., 2017); however, it is also noted for its surface-level analysis due to its delicacy of enquiring nature. The appropriate level of engagement will be contingent on the specific goals threatened by the research, ethical concerns, and whether this community is created in real life.

Challenges in Conducting Netnographic Research

One of the biggest problems with netnographic research is coping and filtering data collected from online sources. There is much data on social media platforms, forums, and blogs. Researchers need to create powerful data management strategies with mechanisms for robust data collection and storage and efficient ways of analyzing those datasets. Poor methods can increase the chances of data overload, which makes it harder to extract useful information and might dilute the quality or focus of research (Kaur et al., 2021). Using automated data collection tools and other related software for the qualitative analysis could help reduce this problem by enabling the researcher to effectively aid his extensive set of unstructured databases.

Netnographers face a further hurdle in keeping abreast of rapidly changing online platforms and facilities, and the digital landscape is constantly evolving, with new social media platforms appearing and old ones tweaking their features or algorithms. Scientists must continuously educate themselves on the latest tools to work best in this fast-moving environment. In addition, technical complications like restricted data access, platform-specific data formats, and API policy changes can also constrain research (Kozinets et al., 2018). Netnographic researchers must be prepared and dedicated to adopting new digital tools/methodologies to keep their netnography research up-to-date and ensure it remains relevant and accurate.

This presents a complex data analysis challenge, the dynamic networked pathways in rich, highly textured online interactions. There are many layers of text, pictures, videos, and multimedia things to consider when it comes to online communication and cultural background. For researchers, this means working with diverse forms of data and developing a range of analytical frameworks sensitive to the often rich but nuanced meanings embedded in online content (Hine, 2000). Because of this complexity, the skill set to use these data has been expanded beyond traditional qualitative analysis techniques and into quantitative approaches, followed by synthesizing them with multiple sources. Advanced software tools, such as the NVivo or MAX QDA for qualitative data analysis and interdisciplinary features, are developed to facilitate analytical power but require much expertise and methodological scrutiny, even on online netnographic studies.

One of the most basic but elemental challenges in netnography is navigating through ethical and legal standards for online research. There are no clear lines between public and private spaces in the digital domain: It accentuated ethical issues (informed consent, privacy, and data protection). Moreover, researchers are bound to uphold ethics and laws that can differ significantly based on location (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). It requires seeking approval, anonymizing the data so participants cannot be identified, and ensuring transparency throughout this process. It is also imperative to be aware of legal constraints concerning data, copyright, and platform-specific policies, which need to be explicated so that neither the research as an exploration nor its findings land into a potential lawsuit.

Prospects of Netnography

Expanding Research Domains is one of the significant prospects of Netnography. While extremely wide and profound, its adaptability gives absolute freedom for developing the extent of connected examination in a wide range of fields. In addition, when advanced associations play a more significant part in our standard involvement, netnography uses that lens to let us investigate the practices and networks of interest based on the internet. Here are some promising tracks that netnography has a ton in sight. In terms of the investigation of patient networks and health behavior online, netnography creates much potential. The online platforms' fast evolved environment: Even as engaging as the rapid growth of online platforms for health discussions, support bands, patients, and societies inside the UK and, in general, provide data to inventors' renderings. Use netnography to

research how patients participate in health-related information checks, experiment sharing, patient insurgence, and peer support cultures in the clinical environment. This possibility ranges from novice understanding of the drifts linked with the patients, the utility gaps in the clinical environment, and even adapting invention schemes that coordinate with the patients. For example, a study has employed the netnography technique to review self-care practices in online discussions, giving to constant disease administration or elegant skills learning techniques among nursing apprentices or university students. (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson 2023)

Netnographic research can also be much more profound in the tourism industry, as it sheds light on tourist behavior and preferences or emerging market trends. Because of visitor destination-sharing and trip experience-seeking travelers, netnography can help analyze user-generated posts on social media, travel blogs, or review sites. It also allows us to understand more clearly consumers' tourist decision-making process, satisfaction, and leisure behavior (Haywood, 1986) rather than relying solely on traditional analytical approaches related to professional disciplines. Netnographic exploration has discovered that some tourists are part of previously unrecognized groups, which allows us to get the existent answers, for example, why Chinese do gap year travel (Uncles & Wu, 2013) and how they behave on trips (Teng et al., 2012; Wu & Pearce, 2007).

Netnography is more used to know the integration between consumer products and services with social media or specific online forums. Marketers get to know consumer sentiments through online interactions, conversations, reviews of a product or service, and brand perceptions/trends. By responding to content instantaneously, companies can gather up-to-the-minute insight into their brand perception and use that data — in real-time — to improve customer engagement or refine the marketing strategy based on what customers are telling them they want. For example, Costello et al. (2017) used the netnographic research method to study brand culture in different settings, such as how marketing campaigns have played a role in and impacted offline and online branding consumer engagement.

Technological Integration

Augmenting current netnography with big data-based analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) can provide a solid basis for the beautiful world of research. Big data technologies are the most appealing in providing contexts of vast online content streams automatically for a deeper perspective on what transpired offline über the digital past. However, AI, when crunching through enormous datasets. Machine Learning and Natural Language Processing (NLP), in particular, can help you look for patterns, trends, or sentiments that are not readily observable without so much data that Machine learning handles easily. Specifically, sentiment analysis systems can detect the emotional tone of online discussions and topic modeling tools — the hidden structure in user-generated content. With new tools, researchers can dive deeper into the existing understanding of online communities and consumer behavior (Kozinets et al., 2018).

A second feature of Netnography is its possibility for Cross-disciplinary Inquiry. It cannot only blend cultural, commerce, and usability data. It is evident by the terminology prevalent as new waves of extension and fine-tuning are layered through adoption, a trend throughout netnography and other methods in more frequent use across diverse fields. For this reason, netnography — in education (more than elsewhere) is likely best as a research methodology to map out more fully the networked learning activities/lab work and student engagement, peer-collaborative interactive anchor events that are digital pedagogies.

The classic example of ethnography's application is providing a way to study social identities, norms, and relations expressing themselves in virtual places. Netnography can serve as a method to expand the analysis of cultural production and interaction over large

numbers of computer-mediated site instances for scholars in digital humanities. Netnography is a tool that studies the formation and maintenance of social identities, norms, and boundaries in an online environment from a sociological perspective. Netnography is an essential approach by computer science, social sciences, or humanities scholars analyzing cultural production and interaction taking place through digital media when studying new ways stories are developed and expressed online. The applications in other domains demonstrate this method's trans-disciplinary orientation, which can be deployed across a range of research questions and contexts to investigate complex digital living situations. (Kaur et al., 2021).

Innovative Applications

Netnography has been a boon for brand management in terms of reputation and engagement for a long time. We can also track real-time consumer sentiment towards the brand, whether positive or negative, based on discussions about brands occurring in social channels, forums, and review sites. It may assist in creating interesting data for marketing strategies and improving a product, but it could also be applied to customer service! Netnographic research could help you identify trends before they go viral, up-and-comers yet to break out, or direct us about those that need an excellent canalization to avoid one of the big times (and show how your brand(s) can gracefully fit-grouped-up into what is matrixed bound for life as some sort public-service announcement forever adapting itself ultimately). For example, a brand might leverage netnography to uncover the cultural significance of their product in consumer practice and orientation — which again not only informs them how best to match messages with customer values but also allows for deep-level engagements of customers as well (Costello et al., 2017).

Also, social media is an abundant source of data for digital cultures and trends hence nearly perfect site to study from the analysis from a netnography perspective. Scholars will learn from social media data how people, as well as communities, are likely to with a piece of writing, enjoy working together via online articles and reviews or express their distinctiveness through collocated life practices. It enables research into online influencers, memes, virality, and subcultures produced through internet spaces. Given the sociocultural effects on public opinion and social movements related to social media technologies and new forms that conduct with collectivity, it is essential to research. Netnography is indeed highly scalable, suitable for the systematic investigation of social media interactions among policymakers and marketers (Kozinets et al., 2018) — even more broadly applicable in this form to many aspects where a view into what happens every day can provide sociologists with much-needed that big picture.

Methodological Innovations

The rapid growth of digital technologies has facilitated the emergence of new forms and instruments for data collection in netnographic practices. This same manual data collection is being replaced and augmented in Turn with modern capabilities: software for people, partly automated tools where there were hands-on. These research facilities, for example, may be data collection such as web scraping software and social media analytics tools that help to extract similar types of automatic batches of large quantities from different territories on forums and social networking sites. These tools help automate the process of extracting data and save overall time in collecting data, freeing researchers up for more analysis and interpretation. Moreover, recent advancements in natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning algorithms enable preprocessing and analyzing text data for patterns, sentiments, or topics that may not be directly visible even through human interpretation(Kaur et al., 2021).

One benefit is employing hybrid methodologies. Combining netnography with other qualitative and quantitative research methods results in a complementary enrichment of

the depth and breadth of data gathering. An alternative approach within this stream is a hybrid methodology that uses the best of various complementary types of research to develop a more complete understanding of online behaviors and communications. Netnographic analysis can help validate survey data and add value by providing substantial human perspective qualitative studies.

Another example is that researchers could add netnography with in-depth interviews to grant more contextual insight and delve deeper into the motivations or views of particular participants. Cross-verification of outcomes from different sources and methods aids in boosting the reliability and validity of research through methodological triangulation (Costello et al., 2017).⁷

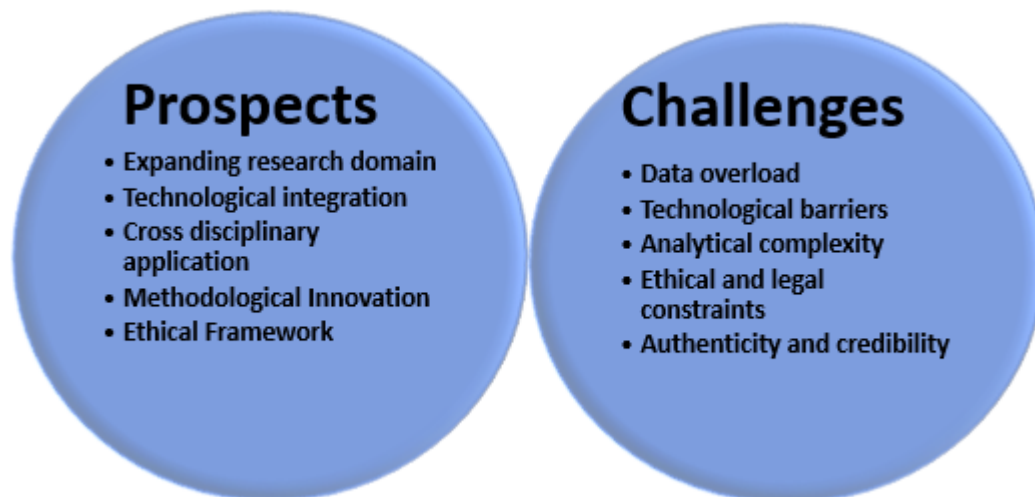


Fig 2 prospects and challenges of netnography

Case Studies of Netnography

Studying online health Communities

Netnography helps explore the behavior of those taking part in online health communities. For health researchers, the information gathered from these spaces is extremely valuable and meaningful. Salzmänn-Erikson and Eriksson (2023) used netnography in their study of online forums aimed at managing chronic illnesses. Their interest was to understand how patients use the forums to guide their self-care, turn to others for emotional help and understand the healthcare processes. The researchers discovered that having peer support and being part of online communities is important for patients handling their diseases.

The research of communities that exist on the internet for mental health support is another case. In forums set up for depression and anxiety, researchers have carried out netnography studies. Studies found that people on the internet exchange strategies for coping, review the effects of medicines and encourage one another. The study has given healthcare providers insight into what patients require and allowed them to strengthen mental health care services (Kozinets, 2010).

Tourism and Travel Behavior Analysis

Researchers in tourism have discovered that netnography reveals thorough information about tourists' interests and choices. Wu and Pearce (2014) used netnography to examine what Chinese tourists did on their gap years. After reviewing remarks in online posts, diaries and blogs, they could distinguish tourist motivations, observations about their

travel experiences and memories of different cultures in their travels. With this information, tourism marketers and policymakers could support and design services for this specific market segment.

Researchers also conducted a significant study on the online activities of people who travel in recreational vehicles (RVs) in Australia. The study of RV tourism used netnography to investigate how campers exchange information on routes, places they have stayed and how to take care of their RVs. The results showed that people in the community use recommendations from others and value the friendships forged on adventures together. Thanks to these ideas, tourism organizations and RV service businesses can provide better services and marketing for RV travelers (Mao-Ying et al., 2014). Netnography has also found valuable applications in tourism research, offering deep insights into tourist behaviors and preferences. Wu and Pearce (2014) utilized netnography to study the experiences of Chinese tourists undertaking gap years. By studying blog posts, diaries and updates on social media, they discovered the reasons for extended travels, the challenges encountered and the cultural exchange the tourists had. The research results were used by those creating tourism strategies to guide them in providing services and building suitable environments for young travelers.

Yet another noteworthy investigation explored how Australian RV tourists use the internet. Scientists investigated how vacationers using RVs share information by netnography. The research pointed out that the community relied on each other's suggestions and made friends during their journeys. Such insights assist tourism authorities and companies in improving the services and marketing they provide for RV tourists (Mao-Ying et al., 2014).

Market Research and Consumer Insights

Businesses have begun turning to netnography to learn more about their customers' tastes. An interesting example is that Procter & Gamble (P&G) turned to netnography to research the Dash product. A netnographic study on the topic of motherhood and household cleaning products was done by Rocca, Mandelli and Snehota (2014). Analyzing how mothers expressed their views online, researchers discovered which areas and needs were most significant for them. As a result, P&G could shape its marketing and offer features that were more helpful for consumers.

Analysts can also explore social media posts related to the release of a product from a technology company. Researchers relied on netnography to monitor what consumers commented, conveyed and talked about on sites such as Twitter and Facebook. As a result of real-time analysis, the company immediately knew how customers felt, so they could respond quickly to changes and resolve any problems that arose rapidly. Following netnography helped to reach the target market and make sure the product launch was successful (Kozinets et al., 2018).

These case studies demonstrate the versatility and effectiveness of netnography in various fields. By providing deep, contextual insights into online communities, netnography helps researchers and businesses understand the complex dynamics of digital interactions and make informed decisions based on real-world data.

Discussion

We have investigated the different aspects of netnography, a qualitative technique taken from ethnography for researching online communities and cultures. Netnography was thoroughly explored by discussing its main issues, challenges and prospects. There are ethical issues with netnography such as getting online users to consent and ensuring their privacy and anonymity. Identifying accurate information and proper portrayals of online

discussions is difficult. Netnographic research requires handling the huge volume of data collected online. Researchers need to follow recent advancements in online tools and services, explore the difficult aspect of understanding multiple digital interactions and ensure they comply with the laws and ethical rules concerning online research. Because of netnography, research can now be done more broadly. Health and nursing help us understand the groups of patients and their health-related behaviors. Tourism allows students to learn about the actions of tourists and new market trends. Social media and online forums assist marketing by revealing how and what people are searching for. Using AI and big data analytics in netnography results in expanded research, as its applications in different fields prove its usefulness.

Conclusion

Netnography is a powerful and versatile research method crucial to understanding digital cultures and consumer behavior. As digital interactions become increasingly integral to daily life, the importance of netnography in providing deep, contextual insights cannot be overstated. By addressing its challenges and leveraging its prospects, netnography can continue to evolve and contribute significantly to various fields of study. Its ability to adapt to the dynamic nature of online environments makes it an indispensable tool for researchers seeking to explore the complexities of digital life.

Recommendations

Researchers should concentrate on important aspects to enhance the approach and apply it in different fields.

- Use of better data collection and analysis techniques such as improved natural language processing and machine learning, will lead to more accurate and efficient netnographic results.
- We must develop guidelines for how to behave ethically when conducting online research. For example, it requires the development of approaches for getting consent to use data online and for maintaining privacy of that information.
- Using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods with netnography can lead to better and broader results.
- If netnography is applied in digital humanities, sociology, education and public health, it can produce new studies and give insights into online communities.
- A Longitudinal netnographic approach allows researchers to learn more about how online communities and their behaviors develop over a period of time.

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