

# Netnography: An Emerging Method Of Marketing Research -A Conceptual Study

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## INTRODUCTION

Netnography is a recent and well established methodology in marketing research (e.g., Kozinets, 2001; Schau and Gilly, 2003; Muniz and Schau, 2005; Nelson and Otnes, 2005; Cova and Pace, 2006; Giesler, 2006; Hemetsberger and Reinhardt, 2006). Recently, Goulding (2003) stressed the need for a greater emphasis on rich and varied forms of data collection in consumer and marketing research in order to get a deeper understanding of consumer society. Referring to Geertz (1973, p. 10), Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003, p. 215) suggest correspondingly ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic research methods that are able to develop “a ‘thick description’ of the lived experience of consumers”. Kozinets developed and defined the technique during his thesis work on fan communities in 1995 as directed at what he then termed “virtual communities of consumption” (Kozinets 1997; 1998; 1999; 2002). It is practically a form of virtual ethnography or cyber ethnography, this methodology adapts traditional ethnographic research techniques to the study of online cultures and communities created in computer-mediated environments such as chat rooms, message boards, emailing lists, dungeons (i.e. themed virtual locations in which interactions are structured by role playing), and rings of thematically linked web pages (e.g., Rheingold 1993; Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2002). The responses of people on the internet websites and forums are analyzed. Netnography is based on observation and/or participation, which let the researcher understand the basic dimensions of a given virtual community. In netnography, the researcher does not need to see the members of the community face to face, nor has to physically interact with them or participate in their activities. Online communities provide the researcher with almost nothing but text and sent responses. Behaviors cannot be observed other than through their textual contributions to the virtual space that help in behavior prediction. Interactions are essentially verbal and expressed in the form of text and, sometimes, images. The data collected are typically downloaded files of newsgroup postings, e-mail exchanges, transcripts of MUD (multi-user dungeons) or IRC (Internet relay chat) sessions that can be combined with the researcher's field notes. Kozinets (1998) points out that netnography is useful for three types of studies and in three general ways. Firstly, as a methodology to study “pure cybercultures and virtual communities that do not exist off-line in real life, but are manifest exclusively through CMC”. Secondly, as a methodological tool to study “derived” cybercultures and virtual communities, and thirdly, as an exploratory tool to study general topics. Online communication between consumers has been studied by using netnography (Kozinets, 1998; Kozinets, 2002) for understanding their attitudes, perceptions, imagery, and feelings. As Kozinets points out, the Internet offers increased opportunities for social group participation, where consumers form virtual communities of consumption in order to assert social power, to unite, and to claim symbols and ways of life that are meaningful to them and the communities they build. Hence, netnographic studies seem to be able to offer those “thick descriptions” of the life worlds of consumers researchers look for. Moreover, netnography makes particularly sense for attempts to analyze communities where access based on conventional methods is difficult (e.g., Langer, 2003; Pires et al., 2003).

## THEORETICAL TOUCH POINTS OF NETNOGRAPHY

Netnography is a qualitative approach of research. The concept of Netnography includes few theoretical concepts on which it is based. Bartl et.al (2009) discussed that main theoretical elements of Netnography include: 1) Qualitative Research, 2) Customer Integration Research 3) Online Community Research, and 4) Web Information Retrieval.

✱ **Qualitative Research:** Qualitative research focuses on human behaviour and the factors that govern human

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behaviour. Qualitative research consists of various methods; most of these examine consumer behaviour in an exploratory way (e.g. focus groups, group discussions and qualitative or semi-structured interviews) vis-a-vis the mostly quantitative hypothesis-testing research in management literature. Ethnography is a novel research method used for social studies in the field of anthropology and sociology. The initial step of ethnography includes field to collect data. The researcher makes cultural entrées and conducts interviews and observation, with participation and relationship development with the subjects. Finally, hypotheses are generated based on the collected data. This classifies ethnography as a grounded theory. An ethnographer needs to get involved as a participant-observer, which makes data collection and interpretation heavily dependent on the skills and interests of the researcher. The term Netnography implies the application of ethnography in an online context. However, there are some significant differences regarding the proceedings of research. Unlike ethnography, Netnography focuses only on social groups represented on the Internet such as forums, blogs, chat rooms, consumer portals, newsgroups, and user generated content platforms. Furthermore, the possibility to download communication data from an online community makes most standard ethnographic manual data collection methods dispensable. Finally, in contrast to ethnography, Netnography is in most cases unobtrusive and data is collected by observation only. Hence, Netnography is an empathic way of understanding wishes, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and rituals within the social context of online communities.

✿ **Customer Integration Research:** In the era of “*open innovation*” researchers as well as consultants proclaim a co-creative value creation process in active cooperation with customers and users. Producers profit from consumer knowledge by integrating the “*area of usage*” early in the product development process, whereas consumers benefit from products that meet their requirements better. Next to already established approaches like the Lead User Method, recent developments of information and communication technologies has led to a new trend in customer integration research by adding a “*virtual*” component to it. As part of this research, **Dahan, Hauser** introduced the virtual customer initiative including different web-based tools in order to reinforce the collaboration of producers and customers throughout the development process (**Dahan, Hauser 2002**). Broadly speaking, virtual customer integration research focuses on the changing role of consumers within the innovation process by establishing an ongoing web-based interaction within all stages of the innovation process. In respect to this, Netnography is classified as a virtual customer integration research method, because it extracts Consumer Insights from dialogs that take place in virtual communities. These Consumer Insights can be integrated particularly into the early steps of the value creation process. The explorative research possibilities of the method allow companies to get answers on questions they may not have even considered in other study designs of traditional market research methodologies, especially in the fuzzy front end of innovation.

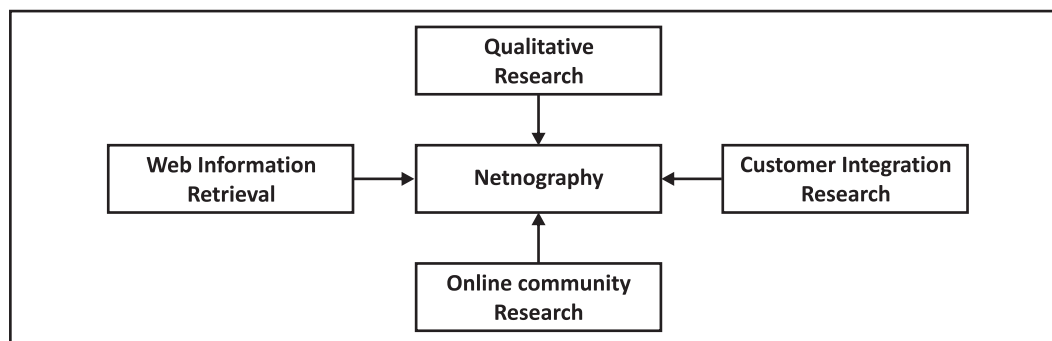
✿ **Online Community Research:** Online Community Research constitutes a fundamental theoretical aspect of Netnography. Online communities are also known as virtual communities, Internet communities, cyber communities, computer-mediated communities and E-tribes. As a multidisciplinary field, online communities facilitate technical, social, and marketing driven aspects for research. Consequently, definitions of online communities vary depending on the disciplinary perspective. Technical oriented definitions focus on the underlying technology whereas in social sciences, definitions concentrate on relationship building, fellowship, social norms, and emotion. Netnography is predominantly used as an online market research method and ,therefore, focuses mostly on virtual communities of consumption consisting of affiliate groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm, and knowledge sharing regarding a specific consumption activity. To understand the significance of online community research for marketing, it is important to understand its value proposition for producers. As large pools of information and product know-how, virtual communities of consumption present an important innovation resource. Online communities provide direct and low-cost access to consumers allowing producers to establish instantaneous dialogue and breed loyalty. By analyzing online communities, companies can recognize trends, identify lead users, and react to new market conditions faster.

Online community research can be conducted as a singular one-time research project, as well as an ongoing research program. Furthermore, community members can be integrated either actively (addressed with specific tasks by the company) or passively (unobtrusively monitoring the community and integrating the gathered information, knowledge and ideas into the new product development process). **Bartl et.al (2009)** suggests that depending on its continuity and level of integration, four different types of Community integration can be distinguished in order to

engage online communities in a company's innovation process .By passively observing the community dialogue Netnography aims to retrieve product-related information about consumer experiences, behaviour, wants and needs. In contrast to Netnography, web monitoring is a highly automatized and continuous process. Based on predefined topics, monitoring software constantly tracks and analyzes online content in search for patterns, trends, valence, etc. Natural language processing and automatic web information retrieval are key technologies of web monitoring. In contrast to the observational research settings of Netnography and Web Monitoring, the active integration methods Community Based Innovation and Innovation Community focus on the actual design of the virtual interaction with users. Defined innovation tasks are assigned to, coordinated and accomplished by members of the community using web-based instruments like User Design, Toolkits, Idea Platforms etc. Thus, the community members become co-creators and development partners (Füller/Bartl et al, 2006).

✿ **Web Information Retrieval** : The growing importance of the Internet as an information medium has lead to development of web information retrieval into a separate research area. It concentrates on searching, extracting and preparing information from the Internet with the help of software tools and algorithms. However there are certain challenges in web information retrieval. Firstly, there is large amount of data present on the web space. Secondly, structure on the web is not standard. Web pages vary in the languages and forms, including text, tables, lists, dynamical and multimedia elements and software tools. Thirdly, the change in Internet is very fast which put forth challenge related knowledge of technology, which has to be constantly adapted to meet the requirements of the dynamic Internet environment. A major challenge is of analysing conversations on the internet which are written with intensive usage of colloquial language, specialized vocabulary, spelling mistakes, abbreviations and in particular because of the common use of irony and sarcasm. All this makes web information retrieval more challenging in comparison to information retrieval from standard offline document databases.

**Figure 1 : Theoretical Touch Points of Netnography**



The four theoretical touch points discussed above give an overview of how Netnography crosscuts different research areas. The above described Netnography touch points relates to theoretical bases of Netnographic research.

## PROCEDURE FOR NETNOGRAPHIC STUDY

**Kozinets** has developed initial work in field of Netnography. Kozinets 2002 describes four procedures/ steps in the netnographic study .These procedures include: **(1)** Making cultural entrée, **(2)** Gathering and analyzing data, **(3)** Conducting ethical research, and **(4)** Providing opportunities for culture member feedback.

**1. Making Cultural Entrée : Kozinets (2002)** points out that the first and most important thing on the part of the researcher is to find out the research problem and frame the questions in which he is interested. The researcher then should study the forums, website and individual participant responses. This will help to come to the conclusion that which forum or website would be best suited for the particular research. All major search engines like Google and Yahoo have groups, on which researchers can analyze the responses of the participants. The researcher can also study blog archives. Kozinets (2002) believe that researchers, whether they are studying online gaming groups, political blogs, or are book shoppers, need to favor studying online communities that: **(1)** Relate to their research question, **(2)** Have more “*traffic*” of different message posters (unless the focus seeks depth of understanding and willingly trades of numbers for richness), **(3)** Offer more detailed or descriptively rich data (as blogs and chat might), and **(4)** Offer



more social interactions. In this regard, communities related to the area of research should be identified. For example, in order to find out preference towards credit cards in India, forums like <http://www.paisawaisa.com/creditcards/>, <http://www.digitalbhoomi.in/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=88>, <http://www.chargebackforum.com/credit-card-debt/better-credit-card-india-878.html> might give valuable insights.

**2) Collection & Analysis of Data :** Since netnography is the online methodology, data source is the internet. There are three ways by which data can be collected for a netnographic study. The researcher can download the data directly from the website or he can copy the responses from the website. The data collected by this method is authentic since the researcher takes it as it is posted on the website. However, handling a large amount of such data is cumbersome. The researcher may need to filter the data from time to time. The second method of collection of data is by observation of various communities on the net, interaction on the community by researchers' own participation on the site. Another method of data collection is by interviewing the respondents on the net. This can be done with the help of email and also through chat or instant messages on internet. The only caution that should be taken while using this method is the usage of abbreviation during chats; this should be addressed properly while collecting data. During chats people use abbreviations for various words which can be used for the research. **Langer and Beckman (2005)** suggested that netnography should be considered to be more like content analysis. However, **Kozinets** states that netnography should never be tied too closely with any one particular method of data collection and analysis. Kozinets in his book *"Netnography - Doing Ethnographic Research Online"* further points out that netnography includes multi-method tool. The methods that should be chosen for data collection and analysis depends on the research questions considered and the strengths of the researcher.

**3) Ethical Considerations:** A major issue related with netnographic study is of Ethical research. Almost all researchers related to this field have advocated that research ethics should be adhered while using netnography as a methodology. **Langer and Beckman's (2005), Kozinets (2002)** have discussed about the ethical consideration. Internet is a virtual space where public as well private discussions are carried out. Kozinets points out that sensitive information are present in chat rooms that, if overheard and shared, might lead to embarrassment. Therefore, the researcher should initially disclose the identity on the community and also the purpose of being present. The researcher should also ensure the anonymity of the respondents in order to get correct responses. The respondent should be assured that their responses would be kept confidential.

**4) Member Feedback:** Member feedback is an important step in netnographic study. In this step, all or major findings of the research are sent to the people who are studied for the research and their feedback is sought. The feedback helps in providing an important insight to the research. Kozinets states that this is also considered ethical to get the feedback from the respondent. Member feedbacks sometimes give new dimensions to the study, which gets ignored by the researcher.

## VALIDITY & RELIABILITY OF THE METHOD

Netnography as a type of research inquiry is quite new. The validity of netnographic data may be subject to many of the same validity concerns and evaluations as other types of qualitative data (for guidelines and discussion see **Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 479-480; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989**). **Kozinets (2002)** states that in tracking market-oriented virtual communities, netnography is a stand-alone method. It is a way in which to understand the discourse and interactions of people engaging in computer-mediated communication about market-oriented topics. During the course of netnographic data collection and analysis, the market researcher must follow conventional procedures that the research is reasonable or "trustworthy", because in most qualitative consumer research, the concept of "trustworthiness" is used rather than "validity," (**Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Lincoln and Guba 1985**). Various scholars have developed methodological procedures for undertaking netnographic studies (e.g. **Thomsen, Straubhaar, and Bolyard, 1998; Catterall and Maclaran, 2001; Kozinets, 2002, 2006; Langer and Beckmann, 2005**) and came forward with specific methods that can be applied to meet the epistemological and methodological requirements of reliability and validity. The typical recommendation is to follow rigorously, the steps of ethnographic research. In order to ensure reliability and validity in the method, **Kozinets (2002)** advises the researchers to disclose their identity and the purpose of the study. However, **Langer and Beckmann (2005)**, distinguish between private and public communication. When access to the cyberspace of a given community is restricted and communication is quasi-



private, researchers actually disclose their presence and obtain the permission to use their texts of social exchange. When the space is public and everybody can have access to texts, in that case, hiding the identity may bring better results. In order to ensure reliability and validity in the study, researchers may follow any of the alternatives on the basis of research issues and practical problems.

## CONCLUSION

Netnography is an established methodology for qualitative research. This method, as compared to other methods, is less time consuming. Netnography is less costly than other methods like interviews and focused groups. It helps in providing a clear insight into the behavior of the consumers on the basis of their comments and responses on web communities, emails, chats and instant messages. Although this method has been well accepted, it suffers from limitations like choice of virtual communities, interpretation of data and generalization of results. These limitations can be overcome by following the procedure of netnographic study. Netnography is widely used all over the world as a qualitative method of research. However, it is yet to get popular in India.

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