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Towards Auto-netnography in Consumer Studies

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to offer an argument for a wider acceptance and adoption of online auto-ethnography - or auto-netnography as an alternative social media research method to online ethnography - or netnography - when undertaking consumer research. As an online research method, netnographies have attracted increasing attention from researchers in various interdisciplinary studies during recent years but the method is still not considered mainstream. Whilst the proliferation of online communities using various social media platforms is increasingly supporting consumers when making product/service choices, the adoption of netnographies appears to leave room for an extension towards the consideration by consumer researchers of how auto-netnography could highlight these researchers' own personal experiences in online communities. Auto-netnography allows the researcher to capture their own online experiences as a consumer would through social observation, reflexive note taking, and other forms of data. Contemporary technology can also provide a more innovative approach with artificial intelligence offering an alternative dimension. We contend there is a need for consumer researchers - both academic and practitioner - to further reflect on and discuss the deployment of auto-netnography in order to contribute to further exploration of online communities through the qualitative lens.

Keywords: Auto-netnography, consumer research, online communities, online ethnography.

Introduction

As the marketing paradigm moves to attempt to understand better more behavioural and experiential considerations of consumers, related methodological requirements have also shifted (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Those consumers participating in virtual worlds are more connected than ever before and are able to communicate with each other both synchronously and asynchronously, and from virtually any location. The development of Web 2.0 technology and interactive applications offer numerous opportunities for qualitative consumer research. In the consumer milieu, these actors are increasingly turning to social media applications for information on which to base their purchase decisions and these online communities appear to affect consumer behaviour and motivations (Liang & Turban, 2011). However, whilst online ethnographies - or netnographies - have attracted increasing attention from researchers in various inter-disciplinary studies during recent years (Anderson, Hamilton & Tonner, 2016; Kerrigan, Larsen, Hanratty et al., 2014), as a social media research method, it is still not considered mainstream (Kozinets, Scaraboto & Parmentier, 2018). In order for netnography to remain relevant, we contend consumer researchers should consider more fully the extent to which the currently under-represented method of auto-netnography (Villegas, 2018) could elucidate researchers' own personal experiences in online communities. As researchers, it is our responsibility to share our self-experiences, insights and stories, and auto-netnography can highlight such researchers' own rich descriptions (Geertz, 1973) which are considered as important data for observing and understanding the world of online communities (Andersen, 2005). In this paper, we first discuss the impact of netnography in consumer research hitherto and second offer an argument for the increased adoption of auto-netnography which allows the

researcher to capture their own online experiences as a consumer would through their own social media observations, reflexive note taking, and other forms of data. The contribution of this paper advances our understanding of how auto-netnography can make distinctive contributions to consumer research in the future.

The impact of netnography

Since the mid-1990s, consumers have been utilising various technologies to actively communicate and interact with each other. The diffusion of these technologies has facilitated the development of online communities among consumers and firms. Web 2.0 has moved beyond the limitations of static web pages and increased the scope, range, and numbers of such online communities and the forms of participation and communication available to their members (Costello, McDermott & Wallace, 2017). The proliferation of social networking sites is increasingly supporting consumers when making product/service choices. In particular, such consumers are increasingly turning to social media applications for information on which to base their purchase decisions (Kozinets, 2015; Liang & Turban, 2011). This radical advancement in technologies has broadened the consumer markets by tapping into the vast - and growing - worldwide population of social media users (Hassan & Casalo Arino, 2016; Leong, Jaafar & Sulaiman, 2017). These social media-based consumer groups, which are referred to as *brand communities* (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), *virtual communities* (Rheingold, 2000) and *e-tribes* (Kozinets, 1999), appear to have a real existence for their members and, as a consequence, appear to affect consumer behaviour. Whilst ethnographic research that is conducted entirely using the Internet appears to have attracted increasing attention from researchers in various inter-

disciplinary studies during recent years, the method is still not considered mainstream (Kozinets et al., 2018). Online ethnography - or netnography - as a qualitative, social media research method, was originally developed by Robert Kozinets as a tool to analyse the online communities of fans of the Star Trek franchise (Kozinets, 2001). Kozinets coined the term *netnography* which is a portmanteau combining 'Internet' with 'ethnography'. However, alternative genres include: *Cyber Ethnography* (Carter, 2005; Robinson & Schulz, 2009), *Ethnography on the Internet* (Carter, 2005), *Network Ethnography* (Howard, 2002), *Online Ethnography* (Beaulieu, 2004), *Virtual Ethnography* (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010; Hine, 2000), *Webethnography* (Prior & Miller, 2012) and *Webnography* (Puri, 2007).

The influence of Kozinets as well as other researchers (see for instance Cova & Pace, 2006; Mathwick, Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2008) has enabled netnography to become an increasingly popular research method for the study of consumption in online communities. In order to analyse the impact of netnography when undertaking consumer research, a search of the Web of Science Core Collection citation index (WoS) was undertaken at the end of 2019. Whilst we focused on research publications written in English, we acknowledge, however, that there is also research increasingly published in other languages. The search criterion we used contained journal articles using the search string 'ethnography of the Internet' OR 'cyberethnography' OR 'cyber-ethnography' OR 'ethnography on the Internet' OR 'network ethnography' OR 'netnography' OR 'online ethnography' OR 'virtual ethnography' OR 'webethnography' OR 'webnography' AND 'consumer research' in the *topic* of the article. This initial search revealed a total of 536 articles published in inter-disciplinary journals between 1997 and 2019. There was no evidence of any research published prior to 1997. Over seventy per cent of these articles were categorised in WoS

as *Business* (26%), *Management* (15%), *Hospitality* (12%), *Communication* (9%) and *Sociology* (8%). Research fields are characterised by patterns of communication between researchers. These patterns of communication manifest themselves in various ways, but foremost among these are citations from one author's work to another. Cronin (1998, p. 48) refers to citations as "frozen footprints in the landscape of scholarly achievement" which can reveal patterns of interaction among researchers and thus evidence of a discipline's structure (Usdiken and Pasadeos, 1995). A citation is the acknowledgement that one article receives from another and generally implies a relationship between parts or the whole of the cited article and a part or the whole of the citing article (Smith, 1981). The basic assumption underlying citation analysis is that researchers cite their influences, so that citations act as surrogates for the influence of the cited work (Acedo and Casillas, 2005; Smith, 1981). Therefore, the total citations to a certain journal offer an acceptable surrogate of that journal's influence on a corresponding research field (Culnan, 1986). A rigorous approach for ranking the impact of journals is the h-index (Hirsch, 2005) which reflects both the number of publications and the number of citations per publication and is defined by the following formula:

A researcher has an index h if h of his/her Np papers have at least h citations each, and the other (Np-h) papers have no more than h citations each.

The index is designed to improve upon simpler measures such as the total number of citations or publications and can, therefore, be a particularly powerful tool to rank the impact of a body of work. In essence, as the h score increases, the volume of citations to a volume of work increases. Cronin and Meho (2005, p. 1275) argue that the h-index helps "to distinguish between a 'one hit

wonder' and an enduring performer". However, according to Franceschet (2010), citation-based rankings of both journals and scholars do not change significantly when compiled on WoS or the alternative service offered by Google Scholar, while rankings based on the h-index show only a moderate degree of variation. The top 25 inter-disciplinary journals in WoS ranked according to the h-index of their published articles between 1997 and 2019 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Top 25 inter-disciplinary journals' citation impact

Rank	Journal	No. of articles	No. of times cited	h-index
1	Journal of Business Research	21	1617	11
2	Tourism Management	10	448	8
3	European Journal of Marketing +	9	413	5
4	International Journal of Consumer Studies +	8	132	5
5	International Journal of Market Research +	4	83	4
6	Marketing Theory + International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	7	132	4
7	Management Decision	7	131	3
8	Industrial Marketing Management +	5	104	3
9	Consumption Markets & Culture +	3	54	3
10	Journal of Marketing Research +	7	56	3
11	Advances in Consumer Research +	2	1407	2
12	Journal of Consumer Research +	2	369	2
13	Journal of Interactive Marketing +	3	351	2
14	Journal of Advertising Research +	3	111	2
15	Creativity and Innovation Management	2	92	2
16	Psychology & Marketing +	3	71	2
17	Business Horizons	5	61	2
18	Journal of Marketing Management +	2	25	2
19	Journal of Consumer Behaviour +	10	21	2
20	Journal of Services Marketing +	7	56	2
21	Journal of Marketing Management +	5	96	2
22	New Technology Work and Employment	2	25	2
23	Journal of Product Innovation Management	2	25	2
24	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science +	3	39	2
25	California Management Review	1	179	1
	TOTAL	125	6208	

+ Marketing journal as classed by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2018)

The dominance of *Marketing* classed journals is evidenced with sixteen journals appearing within the top 25 inter-disciplinary journals. However, the Journal of Business Research, classed as *General Management, Ethics, Gender and Social Responsibility* by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2018), leads the table with 1,617 citations and an h-index of 11. The leading other non-*Marketing* classed journal is Tourism Management at number two with 448 citations and an h-index of 8. This is followed by International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management at number seven with 131 citations and an h-index of 3. These findings thereby indicate the inter-disciplinary nature and impact of netnography. The highest ranked journal classed as *Marketing* by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2018) is the European Journal of Marketing at number three with 413 citations and an h-index of 5. However, the highest *cited* journal classed as *Marketing* by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2018) is the Journal of Marketing Research with 1,407 citations but with an h-index of 2, thereby indicating the lower impact of this journal on the discipline. In industrial marketing literature, the only ranked journal classed as *Marketing* by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2018) is Industrial Marketing Management at number nine with 54 citations and an h-index of 3. Within this literature, we note, in particular, netnography has been deployed to understand collective behaviours (Seregina & Weijo, 2016; Weijo, Hietanen & Mattila, 2014), brand conversations (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), fans ongoing relationships with celebrities and the associated fandom (Cocker & Cronin, 2017; Logan, 2015), how consumer desire is transformed by technology (Kozinets, Patterson & Ashman, 2016) and audience dissipation towards an established brand (Parmenter & Fischer, 2015). Kozinets (2002) also highlights the unobtrusive nature of netnography, working within the boundaries of the open-access, in online communities and the publically available comments to gain practical insights into consumer

behaviour and motivations, which might otherwise be difficult to study face-to-face. Therefore, netnography is a way to approach the value of social listening and to provide holistic consumer understanding (Reid & Duffy, 2018). However, in the special issue on Evolving Netnography in the Journal of Marketing Management, Kozinets et al. (2018) argue that netnography must *adapt* if the method is to remain relevant for research, specifically as the subjects to explore as well as the tools are changing rapidly.

Towards auto-netnography

In order to respond to Kozinets et al. (2018) call for netnography to adapt and remain relevant, we contend this leaves room for an extension of the method towards the consideration by consumer researchers of how *auto-netnography* could elucidate such researchers' own personal experiences to provide a more nuanced account of online communities (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009). Auto-netnography, defined as an "approach to netnography that highlights the role of the netnographer's own experiences of his or her own online experiences" (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009, p. 8), allows the researcher to capture their own online experiences as a consumer would through their own social observations, reflexive note taking, and other forms of data (see for instance Mkono, 2016; Mkono, Ruhanen & Markwell, 2015). The researcher uses principles of autobiography *and* netnography to undertake an auto-netnography. Thus, as a social media research method, auto-netnography is both a process and product. Auto-netnography, which can be deployed by academics and practitioners (Villegas, 2018) both as an autonomous research method or part of a larger netnographic research effort (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009), is an approach where researchers write about epiphanies - self-claimed phenomena in which one

person may consider an experience transformative while another may not (see Denzin, 1989) - that stem from, or are made possible by, being a member of an online culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. Applications of auto-netnography have been published in tourism research (Mkono, 2016; Mkono & Markwell, 2014; Mkono et al., 2015), multi-site research (Minowa, Visconti & Maclaran, 2012), and learning and teaching research (Kruse, 2013). However, a further search of WoS for journal articles using the search string 'online autoethnography' OR 'autonetnography' OR 'online auto-ethnography' OR 'auto-netnography' AND 'consumer research' in the *topic* of the article, revealed only 4 articles published in interdisciplinary journals between 1997 and 2019 inclusive (the term has been spelt both with and without a hyphen). These journals were Annals of Tourism Research (two articles) and Journal of Marketing Management (two articles). We argue this finding highlights the potential of the method for consumer research and suggests that researchers have, hitherto, under-represented their personal experiences in online communities (Villegas, 2018). This under-representation is partly because the 'auto' arrangement - reflexivity and self-reflection - has yet to be incorporated into netnography. Furthermore, this under-representation could be because, arguably, due to the *newness* of the method, researchers have not yet described fully how to *do* an auto-netnography (for a rare exception see Villegas, 2018).

In response to this under-representation, Kozinets (2015) envisages auto-netnography as a progressive extension of netnography which allows researchers to reflect on their own online experiences to gain insights into marketplace cultures and meanings. One could argue, even the passive netnographers' nature of *lurking* in online communities could be analysed as a form of auto-netnography, as the researcher is making field notes, documenting the response to the

communities' communications (Reid & Duffy, 2018), similarly the active netnographers' nature of *mingling* allows for agency in establishing relations between members in online communities. An advantage of auto-netnography is that researchers enjoy ease of access to the rich descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of consumers' private virtual worlds. Thus, by adopting auto-netnography, researchers call on their own online experiences and reflexive discourses as the source from which to investigate a particular social phenomenon. Furthermore, through reading reflexive discourses, researchers may become aware of realities that have not been considered previously, which makes auto-netnography a valuable method of qualitative inquiry. The notion of introspection can sometimes appear synonymous with auto-ethnography (see for instance Gould, 2012; Kozinets et al., 2018; Minowa et al., 2012; Weijo et al., 2014). Ellis (1991, p. 30) argues that auto-ethnography changes the focus of research attention, moving it from the "use of self-observation as part of the situation studied to self-introspection or self-ethnography as a legitimate focus of study in and of itself." In the introduction to the special issue on Consumer Introspection Theory in the *Journal of Business Research*, Gould (2012, p. 453) included both auto-ethnography and auto-netnography as some of the "many forms" of introspection. Such forms include consumer introspection (see for instance Gould, 1995, 2012; Holbrook, 2005; Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993), meta-introspection (Patterson, 2012), pure introspection (Villegas, 2018) or reflexive introspection (Takhar-Lail & Chitakunye, 2015). Auto-netnography, which can be applied both as an autonomous research method or part of a larger research study, allows researchers the opportunity to explore the nuances of social phenomena from a suitably engaged position, and then to represent this positionality in their analyses of online experiences and socio-cultural phenomena (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009). Furthermore, the evolution of online communication from textual to graphic virtual worlds enhances the dynamism of online

interactions and creates new and exciting opportunities for consumer research (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009). Thus, auto-netnographies are not restricted to the reflexive narratives that consumers publish online but can make use of other types of media such as audio, videography and photographic as data sources (see for instance Scarles, 2010). However, data sources using more contemporary technology, i.e. Web 5.0, could provide a more innovative approach with artificial intelligence offering an alternative and emotional dimension for auto-netnographies (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). We believe that such other, more complex forms of data sources should, and will, feature in auto-netnographies more frequently in the future (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). In sum, we contend, that there is a need for consumer researchers - both academic and practitioner - to further reflect on and consider the deployment of auto-netnography as a social media research method in order to facilitate further and alternative exploration of online communities through the qualitative lens.

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