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# A Changing Netnographic Landscape: Is There a Place for Online Ethnography in Hospitality and Tourism?

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Whalen, Elizabeth, "A Changing Netnographic Landscape: Is There a Place for Online Ethnography in Hospitality and Tourism?" (2017). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 14.  
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## **A Changing Netnographic Landscape: Is There a Place for Online Ethnography in Hospitality and Tourism?**

### **Introduction**

Ethnography, which translates to “culture writing”, is the foundation of the field of anthropology. This technique has been incorporated into other fields, such as hospitality and tourism, in order to enhance the methodological toolkit of researchers. Anthropologists often consider ethnography to be more than a technique of qualitative research. Instead, ethnography is viewed as a comprehensive methodology with guidelines, moral codes, and a strong heritage for providing the theory of description in conjunction with other theoretical understandings (Nader, 2011). In order to study online consumption communities, hospitality and tourism researchers adapted ethnographic methodologies to fit the virtual realm (Kozinets, 1997).

The use of adapted ethnographic techniques to study online consumer based communities was named netnography. Some of the potential advantages of netnography include the availability of readily accessible information that can reduce some of the time-consuming nature of ethnographic research by providing additional resources for comparison and study, considerably reduced costs relative to traditional fieldwork methods while providing insight into a naturally occurring community (Kozinets, 1997; 1998; 2002; 2006), and access to potentially difficult to reach populations that may otherwise not be included in consumer research (Mkono, 2013c; Wu & Pearce, 2014a). In Kozinets’s (2015) newest edition describing netnographic methodologies, he questions the direction netnography is headed which is a different direction than traditional ethnography.

Studies using netnography have grown in popularity and have attracted a number of researchers across many business based disciplines. The easy access to data attracted many researchers. With its increased usage as a consumer behavior methodology, researchers have continually adapted and shifted the netnographic techniques beyond the foundation of ethnographic best practices. While some of the studies produced are well grounded in methodology adapted from well-formulated and tested methods based on the long-established ethnographic techniques from anthropology, other researchers have developed their own methodology moving away from this foundation.

Marcus (2012), a recognized thought leader in anthropology, warns that ethnography’s growing popularity and adoption by scholars not formally trained by the anthropological traditions “threatens to undermine its validity and effectiveness” (p. xiii). Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2012) further this sentiment in their manual covering best practices in virtual ethnography *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* with the fear that ethnography will become so broad that it will become obsolete. Due to the adaptations of ethnographic principles online, it is important to review the current uses of netnography in order to compare current hospitality and tourism studies that use netnography terminology versus traditional ethnographic practices and principles. This paper aims to compare the current uses of netnography in hospitality and tourism, often founded on the work of Kozinets (1997; 1998; 2002; 2006; 2010; 2015), against the establishment of ethnographic methodologies founded and regarded in the field of anthropology.

As netnography has evolved, it has created its own set of methodologies which has left a void that could be filled by a more traditional ethnographic approach based on the objectives of the study. The evolution of netnography away from ethnography is important to understand and create distinction in order that the rigors of qualitative hospitality and tourism research remain strong and viable for future studies. By comparing the new path of netnography with the traditional path of ethnography, researchers will be able to use the methodology that best fits his or her objectives for research.

## **Methodology**

The original development of Netnography, as an adaptation of ethnography developed from cultural anthropology, used anthropology as the foundation of the methodological techniques. With the subsequent changes in methodological practices, it is important to examine the methodologies to determine current practices and the space there may be for traditional methodologies. A systematic literature review was conducted in order to identify, critically evaluate, and synthesize all the published literature on netnography in the hospitality and tourism industry (Fink, 2013; Myers, 2013). Specifically, published research from the hospitality and tourism literature that claimed netnography as the method were included, while papers that used similar methods, but did not cite netnography as the method, were not included. The search was conducted using Google Scholar and the University database. The key words in the search comprised any combination of “netnography”, “hospitality”, and “tourism”.

The literature was then analyzed through a content analysis (Myers, 2013) by identifying the similar themes within the research then extrapolating common areas of discrepancy. This was accomplished by identifying the method, procedure, sample, analysis, and the purpose and objectives of the published papers then comparing to the other publications. The content analysis of the current systematic literature review produced three major themes for areas of incongruity between netnography and ethnography: (1) online communities, (2) data collection, and (3) ethics. While many articles were reviewed, only those that are used as examples are cited within the paper given the scope of the methodology currently used.

## **Literature Review**

### *Online Communities*

Defining online communities consistently with how anthropologists would define cultural communities would exclude standard review websites because they lack crucial member interactions that create the standards of recognized communities (Boellstorff et al., 2012). For example, in Mkono's (2013a) investigation of authenticity in tourist restaurants in Victoria Falls, she not only assessed online reviews, but also spent time physically present in the restaurant in order to become a participant observer. It would be unlikely for her to interact with other group members online because the platform does not allow for customer to customer interaction. Without the ability to create group rules, laws, and norms of behavior, the online content, while still valuable, is not a part of a true online community as defined by anthropological standards. However, in Kozinet's (2015) latest work, he claims that the shifting landscape of virtual communication allows for a paramount shift in the definition of community. As virtual groups

develop, some researchers are realizing that traditional anthropology protocols do not always hold for online communities.

In Burns and Cowlshaw's (2014) study of UK airline communication between the organization and consumers, the researchers evaluated the corporate websites, annual reports, and press releases. This study strays far from traditional ethnography as there are no community members or interactions and there is no existence of an online presence. In marked contrast, Tavakoli and Mura (2015) investigated a purely virtual realm that only exists in the ephemeral online world. Their study looked at how Iranian women adapt their identities and behavior to the social norms within Second Life, a virtual tourist destination simulation. Although their study explicitly examines a purely online community, their methodology is more akin to a quasi-experimental method rather than an ethnography. The researchers recruited young Iranian Muslim women to join Second Life in order to follow their path through the virtual realm. While Second Life creates an online community, this study does not specifically examine the online community, but instead individual adaptations to the community through experimental methods.

The blogs used by Woodside and his colleagues (Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehaung, 2007; Martin, Woodside, & Dehaung, 2007; Hsu, Dehaung, & Woodside, 2008; Martin & Woodside, 2011) also pose a unique situation. These blogs could potentially be part of a bigger community, however when separated as single users, the important interactive and contextual understanding is lost. These studies provide valuable insight into consumer creation of brand destination image. They are not strictly part of a community, however, and this precludes ethnography as a methodology for such studies. Osman, Johns, & Lugosi (2014) similarly only studied content from individual posts rather than the dialect between posts from their blogs when they coded and analyzed tourists' interpretations and narratives about McDonald's abroad.

This finding also poses an important question about the difference between a virtual or online community and communications among a physical community through online channels. If the communication online is used to describe and understand the physical world without creating a sense of community and belonging in the online realm, then the study is not really evaluating online communities. In this case, the methodology used should be ethnography where the online platform becomes another medium for study rather than the focus of the interaction and community space.

For example, Janta and her colleagues decided to supplement their thematic analysis of forum postings with interviews and a web based questionnaire (Janta, 2011; Janta et al., 2011a; Janta et al., 2011b; Janta et al., 2012; Janta & Ladkin, 2013). Janta (2011) even describes the web-based questionnaire as the "main stage of the data collection", where the analysis of the reviews and the interviews were conducted in order to refine and develop variables (p. 806). This shows that the existing community is the tangible, real life community, not necessarily a virtual community created through the online forums. The availability and use of online content is to help understand physical boundaries rather than virtual ones, and brings into question the true use of ethnography of an online community. In this case a community does exist, however this study was not evaluating how Polish migrants came together to form a virtual community, but instead as tool to understand the real experiences of Polish migrants in physical work settings.

Rokka and Moisander (2009), conversely, study a purely online community they describe as “a social network or tribe of consumers who engage in online interaction via computer networks” (p. 201). Their study investigated how the desire for ecological and environmental changes in tourism practices brings individuals together to form communities. The community is defined by consumer participation in discussions via forums or chat rooms about topics that are shared interests or experiences, and exist in the ephemeral, non-physical space online. “The members’ shared lifestyles and tastes, sense of belonging and collective consciousness, common rituals and practices, emotional links, and even shared moral responsibilities” define the community and often result in demographic heterogeneity (Rokka & Moisander, 2009, p. 201). Rokka and Moisander (2009) interpreted the dialogues between group members as cultural texts, and explain the dissemination of environmental knowledge through the online community.

### *Data Collection*

While ethnography incorporates many data collection techniques such as individual and group interviews, surveys, historical document analysis, and any other techniques deemed important and beneficial to aid in understanding the research questions, the cornerstone of ethnographic study is participant observation (Boellstorff et al., 2012; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Marcus, 2012). Participant observation requires in depth immersion into the community, prolonged engagement, and researcher identification by cultural members along with a combination of participation and observation through persistent conversations and interactions. Both participation and observation lead to active involvement and temporary membership with the studied community. This requirement for participant observation, however, is a major differentiating point between netnography and ethnography

Most current netnographic research does not include participant observation with researchers advocating for non-participant observation methods of data collection. Utilizing the vast quantity and variety of consumer reviews available online, many tourism and hospitality researchers analyzed the already available content rather than actively participating in an online community by the means of ethnographic principles. For example, Mkono (2011; 2012; 2013b; 2013c) used the available marketing messages found on company websites and reviews found on TripAdvisor, Virtualtourist, and Iqoo to study authenticity in dining experiences for tourists at Victoria Falls; Woodside and his colleagues used personal online blogs as storyboard maps to tell narratives about different destination brand images in Bologna and Florence (Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007), Mumbai, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo (Martin, Woodside, & Dehuang, 2007), Beijing, Lijiang, Shanghai, and Xi’an (Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2009), and Tokyo (Martin & Woodside, 2011); and Rageh et al. (2013) found reviews on holidaywatchdog.com and TripAdvisor to evaluate the customer experience at hotels in Sharm el Sheikh.

Other examples include Janta and her colleagues who studied Polish migrant workers in UK hospitality sectors by reviewing online Polish communities found on gazeta.pl, mojawyspa.pl, and ang.pl (Janta, 2011; Janta, Ladkin, Brown, & Lugosi, 2011a ; Janta, Brown, Lugosi, & Ladkin, 2011b; Janta, Lugosi, Brown, & Ladkin, 2012; Janta & Ladkin, 2013), Dias, Correia, and Lopez (2014) who evaluated reviews found on HomeAway.uk.com to study vacation rental behavior in Albufeira, Portugal, and Small and Harris (2014) who used newspapers in online formats and television news sites to examine travelers opinions about crying babies on planes.

Researchers who do not actively engage with the community consider their research as a form of non-participant observation (Hallem & Barth, 2011; Janta et al., 2012; Mkono, 2011; Rageh, Melewar, & Woodside, 2013; Small & Harris, 2014). One of the stated reasons for non-participation includes maintaining the integrity of user postings due to researcher impact (Mkono, 2011; Rageh, Melewar, & Woodside, 2013), similar to the principles of the Heisenberg effect which states that the mere act of observing a phenomenon changes and alters the behavior of that which is being observed.

While most hospitality and tourism researchers debate the use of participant observation, a few followed ethnographic methodologies and become actively engaged in the online community. Dwivedi (2009) spent time passively observing (lurking) and studying two message boards in which he later became an active participant. His research investigated the online destination image of India from a consumer perspective by engaging with two of the largest and highest ranking travel communities for independent tourists to India, Lonely Planet's The Thorn Tree and Indiamike.com (Dwivedi, 2009). Hallem and Barth (2011) claimed to use both participant and non-participant observation by studying some posting threads and by participating in other posting threads in order to understand the perceptions of medical tourism, specifically cosmetic surgery, in Tunisia. They also followed up with certain community members to conduct private sessions for further analysis.

Some researchers state that the limitation of netnographic research is the inability of the researcher to guide topics and discussions, probe for clarification or details, or confirm demographic information (Mkono, 2013c; Osman, Johns, & Lugosi, 2014). Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge (2013) detail these limitations for non-participative research, including (1) lack of control for participant selection, (2) participants choose discussion topics and control the direction the discussions take, (3) the researcher cannot ask for clarification, further detail, or elaboration on central themes, and (4) researchers rarely have the opportunity to explore individual histories or backgrounds. These limitations severely hamper researchers' abilities to explore all the dimensions and depth of the social phenomena, however if the research is conducted using participant observation, these inabilities are not only minimalized, but often removed fully. These limitations show that despite the availability of non-participant data collection with netnography, there is still a need for ethnographic methodologies in online research.

### *Ethics*

Some netnographic researchers advocated for full disclosure of researcher presence and intentions online, while others disagree with the necessity of doing so in spaces that are dedicated to public discourse online. The most widely cited work that supports the stance for non-disclosure in netnographic research is the work of Langer and Beckman (2005) (Hallem & Barth, 2011; Janta, 2011; Osman, Johns, & Lugosi, 2014; Rageh, Melewar, & Woodside, 2013; Shakeela & Weaver, 2014). Langer and Beckman (2005) argue that disclosure can negatively impact participation and change the organic nature of the conversation due to the effect of researcher engagement and exposure. They specify this impact especially when investigating communities that focus on private or sensitive matters, such as health. Their study examines the conversation surrounding cosmetic surgery, something that is rarely discussed in public (Langer & Beckman, 2005). By

maintaining the absence of known researcher presence, community members can discuss cosmetic surgery without taboo, and the potential anonymity helps members save face and distance themselves from the risks of condemnation and denunciation (Langer & Beckman, 2005).

Other researchers plainly state that they do not believe it is necessary to obtain consent for online content due to its public availability. Since users have complete control over what is posted, and the content is openly accessible, they do not feel it is necessary to ask for permission (Hallem & Barth, 2011; Mkono, 2011; Osman, Johns, & Lugosi, 2014; Rageh, Melewar, & Woodside, 2013; Wu & Pearce, 2014a). Wu and Pearce (2014a) argue that the guidelines for consent to study online communities are “too rigorous and endanger the unobtrusiveness of online communication studies” (p. 465). Rageh, Melewar, and Woodside (2013) assert that the increased normalization of electronic communication and public forums has negated the need for consent due to poster understanding of the universal opportunity for interpretation, access, and use of online data.

The AAA (2004) clearly states, however, that implied consent does not absolve the researcher from fully disclosing the purpose and procedures, risks and benefits, plans for use, and protection of participants. Their statements create a very decisive interpretation of researcher obligation and ethics with ethnographic methodologies, even if written consent is not mandatory. While netnography may not require full disclosure based on data collection techniques, traditional ethnography does.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

As the review of netnography has shown, it has moved away from traditional ethnography principles which leaves an opportunity for ethnography research based on these objectives. With the changing landscapes of online research, netnography has shifted to fit the needs of researchers in hospitality and tourism. This has left a void behind, however, for traditional ethnographic methodologies. As netnography grows and changes, traditional ethnography should not be lost in the process. Ethnographic principles grounded in the foundation of anthropological doctrines should remain important and distinct from netnography. The ability to use the diverse tools in the qualitative toolbox will help hospitality and tourism researchers understand the transforming marketplace.

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