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## Netnography: Range of practices, misperceptions, and missed opportunities

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[10.1177/1609406917700647](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/2636)

Costello, L., McDermott, M. L., & Wallace, R. (2017). Netnography: range of practices, misperceptions, and missed opportunities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 10.1177/1609406917700647. Available [here](#)

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# Netnography: Range of Practices, Misperceptions, and Missed Opportunities

*International Journal of Qualitative Methods*  
Volume 16: 1–12  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1609406917700647  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq



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## Abstract

This is the first article to describe how broadening of the term netnography in qualitative research is leading to misperceptions and missed opportunities. The once accepted need for human presence in netnographic studies is giving way to nonparticipatory (passive) approaches, which claim to be naturalistic and bias-free. While this may be tenable in some environments, it also removes the opportunity for cocreation in online communities and social media spaces. By contrast, participatory (active) netnographers have an opportunity to conduct their research in a way that contributes value and a continuity of narrative to online spaces. This article examines the ways in which netnographies are being used and adapted across a spectrum of online involvement. It explores the ways in which netnographies conform to, or depart from, the unique set of analytic steps intended to provide qualitative rigor. It concludes by advocating for active netnography, one which requires a netnographic “slog” where researchers are prepared for the “blood, sweat, and tears” in order to reap rich benefits.

## Keywords

netnography, participatory research, online community, social media, qualitative research, online ethnography, cocreation

## What Is Known?

Despite the widespread use of netnography as a qualitative method in diverse research settings, it is often poorly understood by researchers. Netnography’s procedural steps provide rigor and can be adapted and combined with other research methodologies. However, its effectiveness as a qualitative methodology relies on the need for human presence and personal connections online.

## What does this paper add?

This paper argues that some studies purporting to be netnographic neither follow nor adequately report on netnographic processes. Furthermore, in many cases, passive nonparticipatory approaches to netnography miss opportunities for ongoing cocreation in online communities and social media spaces. If researchers were more engaged in active, real-time participation in their netnographies, they could also contribute to important online social narratives.

This article shows how imprecise use of the term netnography is creating misperceptions and missed opportunities regarding the development and management of online communication environments. To demonstrate the reformulation of this term, we review the emergence of netnography, the growing preference for

“observational” and other “nonparticipatory” (passive) netnographies, and canvass opportunities to use real-time, participatory (active) netnographies to the advantage of online communities and “social media spaces.” While not attempting a systematic review of netnographic studies and practices, we have selected papers and studies highlighting the core of the netnographic practice and the divergence from this in many studies claiming either to be netnographies or to apply netnographic methods.

Qualitative research methodologies for the online environment have been described as “sitting within a broader methodological context of online or virtual ethnography which comprise approaches for conducting ethnographic studies of online communities and groups” (Wiles, Bengry-Howell, Crow, & Nind, 2013, p. 20). Tunçalp and Lê’s (2014) review of online ethnography outlined some concise and convenient methodological terms such as “virtual ethnography” (Hine, 2000, which she later rephrased as “Ethnography for the

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Internet”, 2015), “cyber-ethnography” (Ward, 1999), “connective ethnography” (Dirksen, Huizing, & Smit, 2010), and “netnography” (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2010, 2015) alongside more descriptive, combined terms such as “computer-assisted webnography” (Horster & Gottschalk, 2012) and “netnographic grounded theory” (Healy & McDonagh, 2013).

While some researchers regarded online ethnography, cyber-ethnography, virtual ethnography, and netnography as synonymous terms (Grincheva, 2014), others argued for finer distinctions and promoted the use of another portmanteau term “investigative research on the Internet (IRI)” to identify a qualitative research method they considered similar but not identical to netnography (Lugosi, Janta, & Watson, 2012).

Confusion about terminology has arisen in part because the scope and the methods encompassed by these portmanteau methodologies are wide-ranging. As Barna (2011, p. 57) noted, devotees of connective ethnography used a range of methods including “discourse analysis, offline interviews, participant observation in both offline and virtual spaces, and online textual analysis” to analyze the relationships between participant behaviors and words in online and off-line settings, but without segregating these off-line and online contexts.

While netnography is now practiced and applied quite differently than it was when first identified in 1995 (Loanzon, Provenzola, Sirriwannangkul, & Al Mallak, 2013), Kozinets (2010) maintained that when studying an online community, a “pure” netnography was entirely complete within itself and required no off-line ethnographic research. His more recent work emphasized that in a netnographic study, a “significant” amount of data collection “originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the internet” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 79).

Netnography offers a specific set of analytic approaches and processes applicable across a spectrum of online involvement, while the focus on gaining access to an online community also clearly distinguishes between participant observation and non-participant observation (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2010, 2015). Thus, despite netnography often being explicitly described and understood as online ethnography, it is not synonymous with this term nor is it suitable for use as a generic term applicable to any study of material generated in online environments. In his recent review of netnography, Kozinets (2015) stated that it was erroneous to steer netnography in the direction of “unengaged content analysis” (p. 96) and offers a new definition: a “more human-centred, participative, personally, socially and emotionally engaged vector” (p. 96).

### *The Emergence of Netnography*

Netnography emerged in the United States during the 1990s, when the Internet was still in its text-based infancy. Most online communities were closed text-based groups and social media, and other computer-mediated communications were far less integrated into daily life than today. Unlike participants in many other learning situations, members of online communities, then and now, may not share a common work

task or goal and in some cases may only be able to contact each other via the Internet. This may lead strangers to join together to discuss topics or take actions of mutual interest, forming and sustaining long-lived or even short-lived communities of interest and communities of practice. As Antikainen (2007) noted, because members of online communities learn through discussions, online community managers play a key role in providing quality “content to give members better possibilities to learn” (p. 40).

Kozinets’ studies of 1990s fan culture (1998, 2002) had alerted him to the extent to which fan cultures embraced online discussions. This flagged the lack of well-defined research methods for dealing with the large volumes of online data being generated and the ethical issues associated with researching online communities.

In 2002, Kozinets (p. 62) saw netnography as “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through electronic networks.” De Valck, van Bruggen, and Wierenga (2009, p. 197) offered a further definition:

a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the culture and communities that emerge from online, computer-mediated, or internet-based communications... where both the fieldwork and the textual account are informed by the qualitative methods utilized in consumer research, cultural anthropology, and cultural studies.

By moving beyond the limitations of static web pages, Web 2.0 technology increased the scope, range, and numbers of online communities and the forms of participation and communication available to their members. In newer forms of social media, communities are more open where the concerns about “presentation of the self” highlighted by Goffman (1959) appear to matter even more than the sharing of content or the search for information, knowledge, and community. From the late 1990s, Web 2.0 widened the opportunities for member-generated content (including sound and vision) to promote interactions between members and also for utilizing netnography for cocreating value within online communities. Others perceived Web 2.0 as facilitating members’ choice of participation in their own groups of interest and as a multifaceted environment where “Wiki’s are the equivalent to the virtual community databases catering to the informationalists, functionalists, and opportunists. Blogs appeal to the conversationalists. MySpace and Facebook are extensions of member pages that are so popular with the hobbyists” (De Valck, van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009, p. 201).

Kozinets’ (2010) netnography text explicitly addressed these multiple developments by discussing blogging, tweeting, videocasting, podcasting, social networking, and virtual environments. He elaborated that the netnographic research method continued to differ from the many existing forms of online ethnography by offering a more systematic, step-by-step approach to addressing the ethical, procedural, and methodological issues specific to online research.

The emergence of an “Internet of things” and a world where ubiquitous mobile devices keep people connected to the Internet 24/7 (Bodker & Browning, 2013) has, however, challenged the logic of segregating the study of online and off-line communications and cultures. Furthermore, Labrecque (2014) suggested that the ever-increasing use of automated social media responses in online communities may alter members’ engagement with these communities both online and offline.

### *Spread and Acceptance of Netnography*

With Kozinets and other enthusiasts promoting netnography via journal publications, websites, blogs, and social media, it rapidly became a popular online research method for the study of online communities. By reviewing the use of netnography in various fields and nations, this section explores academic opinions on whether netnography has moved from being a “new” methodology to an established one.

The use of netnography spreads from the field of management and business studies, and qualitative consumer research to other sectors such as charities and professional sectors, and has been adopted by researchers worldwide (Wiles et al., 2013). It has crossed language barriers so that netnographies no longer deal only with English-language communities but also with online conversations in languages such as Finnish (Kurikko & Tuominen, 2012), Hungarian (Lugosi et al., 2012), Italian (Di Guardo & Castriotta, 2013; Mortara, 2013), Polish (Janta, Ladkin, Brown, & Lugosi, 2011; Janta, Lugosi, Brown, & Ladkin, 2012), Spanish (Mateos & Durand, 2012), and Chinese (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

The systematic review conducted by Bengry-Howell, Wiles, Nind, and Crow (2011) unearthed many journal articles referencing Kozinets and/or netnography that were related to management and business studies. Netnographic approaches have, however, also recently been published in journals relating to education (Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014; Kulavuz-Onal & Vásquez, 2013), digital journalism (Aitamurto, 2013), geography (Grabher & Ibert, 2014), health (Bratucu, Radu, & Purcarea, 2014; Mudry & Strong, 2013), knowledge management (Chua & Banerjee, 2013), sport (Gilchrist & Ravenscroft, 2011), and tourism (Janta, Brown, Lugosi, & Ladkin, 2011; Mkono & Markwell, 2014). This raft of publications demonstrates that netnography, as a methodological research approach, has a wide reach across many nations, languages, and fields.

Among the many netnographic studies published during the 2000s, there were differing opinions about netnography as a new or “established” research methodology. For example, in 2012, Teixeira perceived netnography as a recognized research method suitable for studying online marketing communities. Pollok, Lüttgens, and Piller (2014, p. 2) likewise considered netnography as an established research method for identifying “practical insights into their [members] usage behaviour . . . to generate valuable input for the early phases of innovative processes.” In contrast, however, netnography was still considered by some as “a new qualitative, interpretive research

methodology that uses internet-optimised ethnographic research techniques to study an online community” (Alavi, Ahuja, & Medury, 2010, p. 82), supported by Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2011) who also considered netnography to be a new research method with which to study consumer behavior. These views of netnography, as established or new, may reveal more about the knowledge and experiences of individual researchers than about the methodology itself. Researchers in the fields of business and consumer studies do appear more ready to regard netnography as an established methodology.

### *Uses and Benefits of Netnography*

This section examines the use of netnography and highlights some of the benefits of various netnographic approaches. One of the methodological advantages of netnography first described by Kozinets (2002) was its unobtrusive nature. Pollok et al. (2014, p. 2) commented on netnography being perceived as the “unobtrusive and noninfluencing monitoring of the communication and interaction of community members to gain practical insights into their usage behaviour.” This perception of observational netnography directly contrasts to more traditional qualitative research methods used to understand behavior such as focus groups, personal interviews, and ethnographies. Simply monitoring online communities via observational netnographic techniques could be considered a more rapid and cost-effective research method (De Valck et al., 2009).

For instance, while studying public responses to adverse events, Gupta (2009) valued netnography as a method for collecting and analyzing data that avoided the limitations of quantitative survey research, typically reliant upon a participant’s memory, and thereby extending the trustworthiness of research findings. The many other methodological benefits of utilizing a netnographic research approach include anonymity, cocreation, rich communication, emergent data, and support groups, and these are explored further in the following section.

As netnography typically focuses on communications within online communities and social media spaces rather than face-to-face groups, the extent to which online identities accord with off-line identities is not of concern. Netnography is particularly well suited to dealing with personally or politically sensitive topics or illegal acts, discussed in online communities by individuals who prefer to conceal their off-line identities and welcome the online anonymity offered. Kozinets (2015, p. 88) described netnography as having a “voyeuristic quality” mainly because it can be used to study stigmatic phenomena, situations, conversations, or encounters, which might otherwise be more difficult to study face-to-face. This fact has justified the use of observational netnography by researchers such as Langer and Beckman (2005) in their study of cosmetic surgery, Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2011) in their study of the politics of the paddler community, and Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) in their study of the Australian fat activism movement. Netnography also assists the study of other online communities supporting marginalized, at risk, and anonymity-seeking groups

(Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013), including migrants (Janta et al., 2012) and students (Janta et al., 2014), or those with specific health concerns and interests (Bletsos, Alexias, & Tsekeris, 2013; Bratucu et al., 2014).

Netnography is likewise an appropriate method for the cocreation of value within online communities and social media spaces. As Costello, Witney, Green, and Bradshaw (2012, p. 2) stated, “netnography recognises that the cultures of online communities are constructed by the members who are invested in their development; hence their description and any construction of theory should be derived from the community members in question.”

Recent studies of online brand communities often state a focus on value creation and empowerment rather than learning. According to Cherif and Miled (2013, p. 14), companies have shifted their focus from the traditional marketing logic of product usage, leaning now toward a “participative model based on interaction between brands and customers.” These authors maintain that the emergence of cocreation within online brand communities has seen the status of the client shift “from being a customer to a producer and actor” (p. 14) and described how the “client experience” contributed to value creation (p. 23). As a result, companies are now creating online platforms and social networking pages devoted to particular brands, conceiving new offers and ideas and gaining consumer feedback, thus creating online communities which thrive on cocreation.

Collaboration, innovation, and competence may originate with participants in these online communities; but as Cherif and Miled (2013) noted, members of these communities also used social networks to post negative messages when reporting dissatisfaction with a brand’s performance, deriding the company for false advertising, or demonstrating solidarity with disgruntled friends. It is therefore essential that companies understand when cocreation is most effective and appreciate how to “balance consumers’ power and counter power and to initiate a co-power approach” (Cherif & Miled, 2013, p. 24). For these authors, netnography appeared to be the most suitable method to scrutinize the influence of community cocreation on brand success.

Kozinets (2010, p. 160) maintained that if netnography is to maintain the values of traditional ethnography upon which it is based, it should provide a “Geertzian” sense of “thick description” through the intense involvement of the researcher in the day-to-day life of the online community. In a similar vein, Fisher and Smith (2011, p. 345) regarded netnography as one of several interpretive research methods that “provide thick descriptions of consumer lifeworlds . . . much more discovery oriented, sensitive to the unique, innovative, and novel.” De Valck et al. (2009) similarly perceived a benefit of netnography as providing opportunities for members to gain “rich, encompassing, and influential” insights into the “word-of-mouth processes in virtual communities” (p. 200) and as a place where new products and strategies could be developed.

Netnography has assisted market researchers, in particular, to identify active online community members with the characteristics of “lead users” rather than those of “representative

customers” (Pollok, Lüttgens, & Piller, 2014, p. 3). The ability to identify different types of members also provides rich data with which to identify market trends, given lead users tend to both express their dissatisfaction and post solutions to product shortcomings (Loanzon et al., 2013). Moreover, netnography has also assisted in the identification of latent needs and innovative concepts in for-profit settings (Antikainen & Väättäjä, 2010; Pollok et al., 2014). Cost-effective identification of lead users, latent needs, and innovative concepts is likewise important for sustaining the effective functioning of online communities in the not-for-profit sector, particular those striving to provide ongoing support and member services on very modest budgets.

As a valid and useful method for dealing with emergent data, netnography is particularly valuable during the “fuzzy front end” of the product innovation process. In this period—between recognition of an opportunity for product or service innovation and the allocation of significant resources to its development—nonintrusive (or observational) netnographic techniques can facilitate the garnering of rich market research data (Loanzon et al., 2013).

### *What Now Constitutes Netnography?*

As the study of online communities and social media spaces has expanded, understandings of the term netnography have now broadened. Loanzon, Provenzola, Sirriwannangkul, and Al Mallak (2013, p. 1572) asserted that “since its inception in 1995, netnography has undergone notable shifts from its most fundamental premises and assumptions to its procedures and applications.” Pollok et al. (2014, p. 3) were particularly concerned that netnography had become a label for “any observation or analysis of data about user interaction in product-related user communities.”

As Tunçalp and Lê (2014) and Pollok et al. (2014) noted, few researchers claiming to “do” netnography have reported, discussed, and evaluated the actual processes of their netnographic studies. While a range of diverse practices could be harbored under the label of netnography, self-identified netnographers appear to be narrowing rather than expanding the scope of netnographic research, choosing to focus on data that is easy to collect and analyze, while minimizing their own engagement with the members of the online communities they are studying. These netnographers also appear to have ignored opportunities to reflect on their netnographic practices, their engagement with the community under study, and their own roles and responsibilities regarding the cocreation of knowledge. For example, Heinonen’s (2011) idea of a netnographic study appears to be little more than an analysis of the responses received to an online survey posted on the online community of interest.

Kozinets (2010) developed the netnographic research methodology to address issues specific to the online context. It is therefore timely to consider which steps, protocols, and characteristics now seem important and relevant to researchers claiming to be conducting netnographic research or adapting

netnographic approaches to suit a particular study. Kurikko and Tuominen (2012, p. 13) hold that “some of the most important standards of quality in netnography are immersive depth, prolonged engagement, researcher identification, and persistent conversations.” However, these characteristics appear to be absent from the work of many researchers claiming to use netnographic methods or approaches (such as Aitamurto, 2013; Bletsos et al., 2013; Di Guardo & Castriotta, 2013; Kondratova & Goldfarb, 2010) and even from those who cite seminal netnography texts by Kozinets (2002, 2010). Conversely, some online researchers including Lampel and Bhalla (2007) and Keeling, Khan, and Newholm (2013) have chosen not to label their work as netnographic, given that the researcher’s level of engagement with their participants was less than Kozinets (2010) recommended for true netnographies.

*How have researchers adapted the netnographic process?* While some netnographers, such as Lima, Namaci, and Fabiani (2014), explicitly stated that they followed the six steps of Kozinets’ (2002) netnographic method, namely, “research planning, entrée, data collection, data analysis, ethical standards and research representation,” others have either adapted or omitted particular steps to suit their study design.” For example, De Valck et al. (2009, p. 197) explicitly stated they drew on Kozinets’ guidelines for their research objective, entrée and data collection, analysis and interpretation, and research ethics, omitting research representation. Bratucu, Radu, and Purcarea (2014) reported following five steps of netnography, entrée, data collection, data analysis, research ethics, and member checks, but omitted to report research planning. However, Füller, Jawecki, and Mühlbacher (2007, p. 63) reported their netnography as having only four steps, being the determination of user characteristics, community identification and selection, observation and data gathering, and the analysis of data and interpretation of findings. Others have adapted the netnographic processes, for example, those customized for nursing by Salzmänn-Eriksson and Eriksson (2012), which included a literature review and the identification of research questions as one of its steps.

In contrast to the previous examples, Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) maintained their data collection procedures were true to Kozinets’ (2010) guidelines because they sought assistance from key stakeholders to guide their selection of online communities, obtained participant consent, and made reflective field notes on their observations of the online community for more than 12 months. Furthermore, they analyzed the textual data they had accumulated with assistance from a key blogger in order to integrate community feedback into their interpretations.

Cherif and Miled (2013) saw the community selection process as having two steps, determining the research questions and the most suitable forums or communities to answer them. Janta, Lugosi, and Brown (2014, p. 558) referred explicitly to all six criteria suggested by Kozinets (2010, p. 89) when selecting sites for netnographic research, namely, that they are relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich.

As Kozinets acknowledged, netnographic sampling can be purposive rather than representative and therefore be inclusive of otherwise marginalized or hard to reach groups. For example, Füller et al. (2007) used this criteria to select just five message boards from 500 basketball-related online communities. Not surprisingly, difficulties in handling large volumes of data mean few netnographies are both wide and deep.

When looking for an explanation of these adaptations or omissions, Langer and Beckman (2005, p. 195) held that Kozinets’ ethical guidelines were appropriate for “restricted (semi) private online communication” but inappropriately rigorous to use as “general guidelines for the study of all online communication,” when compared to more appropriate media and communication research ethics developed specifically for content analysis alone. This logic may explain why practitioners of passive netnography, who research nonrestricted communication within online communities, rarely discuss the applicability of Kozinets’ ethical guidelines to their research. Langer and Beckman (2005, p. 195) noted that it seemed unreasonable that ethical guidelines relating to letters to the editor published in newspapers are much less rigorous than those relating to member checking of intentionally public online postings. Furthermore, Lima et al. (2014) claimed that the first and last of Kozinets six steps, namely, “making cultural entrée” and “providing opportunities for member feedback” have little relevance to passive netnographies or exploratory netnographic studies.

*What do netnographic studies look like today?* Having reviewed the netnographic processes that have been adapted by other researchers, the following section explores how modern netnographic studies are represented in terms of the number of communities in a single study, types of data collected, the depth of the study, and finally, a critique of active versus passive netnographic studies.

*Number of online communities included in a study.* A number of researchers have analyzed multiple online communities simultaneously, while others limit their study to a single community. Some netnographers have undertaken the parallel analysis of several online communities as advocated by Kozinets (2010). For instance, Pollok et al. (2014) analyzed 15 online communities related to “green hi-tech innovation,” while Wei, Straub, and Poddar’s (2011) netnography encompassed 11 online group purchasing websites. A netnographic study by Janta, Ladkin, Brown, and Lugosi (2011) investigated social networking sites in conjunction with Internet fora used by Polish migrants, while Chua and Banerjee’s (2013) netnography of the “my Starbucks’ ideas” marketing campaign, included 200 tweets, 200 Facebook posts, 200 Foursquare tips, and 200 discussion threads.

In contrast, and adopting a more focused approach, Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell (2013) studied brand rivalry specifically between Holden and Ford car owners in their netnographic study of Australian online communities. Similarly, Ekpo et al. (2014) used netnographic techniques to study interactions

between two conventions, Furtime and The Kaleidoscope, and the interactions of their members sharing the same space. Cherif and Miled's (2013) netnography of the French Axe brand community focused specifically on its Facebook community pages "Effet Axe" (the Axe Effect).

Other netnographic studies limited their investigations to a single online community across a broad range of topics and interests, industries, and countries. For instance, De Valck et al. (2009) focused on discussions of cooking and eating within an online community about culinary matters, Xun and Reynolds (2010) studied a single site that reviewed digital cameras, and Kelleher, Whalley, and Helkkula (2011) studied an online community setup for a crowd-sourced information contest. Kurikko and Tuominen (2012) studied an online site for Finnish LEGO enthusiasts, Kulavuz-Onal and Vásquez (2013) conducted a netnography in an online community of practice for English-language teachers, and Janta et al. (2014) studied a website established to support postgraduate students.

*Types of data collected and analyzed.* Many netnographic studies focused on gathering and analyzing text data rather than including other sources such as images, videos, or color. Kondratova and Goldfarb (2010, p. 7) claimed to have conducted a "netnographic color usage study" by studying approximately 1,000 county-specific websites for each of 38 countries.

While Costello's (2009) thesis explored the choice and use of avatars by members of an online health promoting community, few netnographers appear to have taken as much interest in avatars as the folklorist Aldred (2010) who examined their use by LiveJournal members to represent their online identities. Other netnographers have also demonstrated the effective use of netnography with nontext data. For instance, Borghini, Visconti, Anderson, and Sherry's (2010, p. 115) netnography involved monitoring websites and blogs on street art, gathering data about the "activities, thoughts, and critiques of both street artists and consumers," and amassed huge amounts of data including inscriptions, blog pages, Internet blogs, photographs, and videos. Wilkinson and Patterson (2010) also used nontext data in their netnographic study of "mash-up" animations on YouTube.

*Depth and breadth of the study.* The scope of netnographies also differs in relation to the duration and nature of the study. For example, De Valck et al. (2009) conducted a 3-year netnographic study of a single online community, which included a large-scale survey of more than 1000 participants, and which aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how "consumers participate in, and are influenced by online social information networks" (p.186). This multifaceted study gathered data from a number of sources, including building a knowledge base by unobtrusively following forum discussions, monitoring contributions, reading articles, visiting member pages, as well as participating in an off-line community gathering, and interviewing both community members and the community's administrators. This resulted in a rich, descriptive study on which the authors commented that:

because forum contributions mainly come from core members and conversationalists, it allows us to peek into the community's central character and content and learn about the norms, values, perceptions, and attitudes that underlie consumer decision-making about the community's topics of interest. (De Valck et al., 2009, p. 197)

Similarly rich data were gathered in the study conducted by Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013, p. 4), where primary data consisted of 427 participant posts gathered over an 18-month period. The researchers focused on the six most frequent contributors among the 10–15 regular contributors to a blog on a company website. This blog was identified as demonstrating elements of the three markers of community, namely, shared consciousness, shared rituals/traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Thus, it appears that long-term netnographic studies, which collect data from a number of different sources can "add context, enhance information, and yield insights into aspects that would otherwise remain invisible, but that maybe consequential to the research" (Orgad, 2009, p. 41).

*Active versus passive netnography.* Depending on the involvement of the researchers, netnographic studies range from nonparticipatory (passive) to participatory (active) approaches. For example, Alavi, Ahuja, and Medury (2010, p. 87) contended that a netnography could involve either "actively integrating the members of the community or passively monitoring the community and integrating the gathered information, knowledge and ideas into the new product development process."

Many studies have adopted a passive stance. For example, in their study of a forum utilized by same-sex families, Alang and Fotomar (2015, p. 24) described their netnographic technique as "purely observational." Kozinets (2010) also acknowledged that many researchers using the netnographic process adopt an observational stance which Loanzon, Provenzola, Sirriwanangkul, and Al Mallak (2013) also described as a "specialized type of lurking" (p. 1576).

Many other researchers, such as Alavi et al. (2010), Di Guardo and Castriotta (2013), Fisher and Smith (2011), Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2011), Mateos and Durand (2012), and Wei et al. (2011), in their self-proclaimed roles as netnographers, indicated their belief that lurking in online communities or working with archival online data results in naturalistic data analysis, which is both unobtrusive and free from researcher bias. Di Guardo and Castriotta (2013, p. 83) described their purely observational netnography as requiring the researchers to become specialized types of lurkers, and similarly, Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2011) refrained from participating in any of the online discussions they observed and recorded. Alavi et al. (2010, p. 88) believed that lurking in online communities and passively monitoring the community ensured that "the analysis is conducted in the natural context of the community and thus is free from the bias which may arise through the involvement of the researcher or experimental research setting." Moreover, the concealment of the presence of the researcher is frequently

perceived as giving netnography an advantage over other forms of ethnography. For instance, Fisher and Smith (2011, p. 334) believed that “mingling by the researchers might have limited in-depth information or pushed informants away.”

Despite its convenience and popularity, the increasingly common practice of restricting netnography to the passive monitoring of online communities appears to threaten the premise upon which netnographic methodology retains its qualitative rigor. For example, Langer and Beckman (2005, p. 193) stated “without denying its ethnographic relevance, it appears even more legitimate to classify or position content analysis of online communications in between discourse analysis, content analysis and ethnography,” and Lima et al. (2014, p. 7) concurred noting that observational and passive netnography is a “more superficial, less immersive version” of netnography.

In his recent text, where he revisits how netnography has evolved, Kozinets (2015) also commented that the types of observational netnographic studies (as described earlier) are not situated in the “communal . . . but in a notional space of interaction and information exchange around particular topics located on and through particular online sites.” Furthermore, he questions how “netnography can remain personal, when all that may seem to be required is the download, coding, analysis and reportage of this publicly available data” (p. 95). This is supported by Phillips (2011, p. 481) who found that becoming a member of an online fan culture was a necessary process “to obtain rich data for his research on fandom.”

A researcher’s active participation in an online community is admittedly neither always easy nor appropriate, particularly when researching online communities dealing with extremely sensitive or risky matters. While a researcher working with historical online data or in a purely observational capacity can develop a sense of immersion and belonging to an online community, they cannot be part of its cocreation processes. Arguably, the analysis of archived online textual data by off-line researchers who have never actively participated in the communities for which, and through which that data was created, is perhaps more appropriately categorized as archival research than as netnography or ethnography.

*Why so little autonethnography or mention of field notes?* According to Costello et al. (2012, p. 3), “the idea of netnographic enquiry implies a need for human presence in communication in that it . . . involves the netnographer in the role of being part of the research.” As Lugosi, Janta, and Watson (2012) noted, netnography, within and about online environments, should be viewed as being productive as well as analytical. Furthermore, they acknowledged the researcher as a crucial element in fashioning the idea of community, while conceding that the researcher’s vision of the community may not necessarily be the same as that of the community members.

Despite this, few researchers claiming to apply netnographic approaches barely even acknowledge themselves or their experiences of participating in the online community they studied. However, Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2011) did acknowledge their interpretation of archival online discussion threads

drew on almost a decade of liaison with participants and other key stakeholders, in their study of strategic policy-making in England and Wales. Others recorded their personal emotions as reflexive field notes (Wilkinson & Patterson, 2010), a strategy recommended by Kozinets (2010). Phillips (2011, p. 481) saw autoethnography as the framework for his netnography, and described it as an “online ethnographic research project that uses interviews and interactions with participants to present qualitative data within an autoethnographic context.” While conscious of the tension between his fan and scholar roles, he also felt that “by participating I was able to position myself as part of a social sect of The Board. In doing this, I made what I felt were meaningful connections separate from my role as a researcher” (p. 483). With his fan experiences serving as a springboard to debating both fan practice and online community boundaries, his participation included posting on a range of topics and participating in message board games.

Yet even the passive netnographers’ experience of lurking could, and arguably should, be analyzed autoethnographically perhaps by making field notes documenting their responses to the community and its communications, while acknowledging the background they bring to their netnographic research and interpretation of netnographic data. For example, Wei et al. (2011) reported making extensive use of field notes while observing participant behaviors as they occurred and consulted these notes when drafting their journal article. Similarly, the netnography conducted by Aitamurto (2013) also recorded participant observations and interactions within the online community, amassing a significant amount of data. Likewise, Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) made reflective field notes on their observation of blogs over a period of more than 2 months; and after gaining familiarity with the language and practices of dieters’ discussion boards, Leipämaa-Leskinen (2011) recorded her observations of dieters’ online diaries and discussion boards.

Although netnographers may seek to “implant themselves in the online environment, freeing themselves from pre-conceived ways of knowing” (Costello et al., 2012, p. 9), the frameworks underpinning their research aims should inevitably shape their final interpretations of the netnographic data. For those researchers, “the cultural studies [and other] frameworks . . . provide the conceptual foundations for investigating online community” (p. 9).

### *Alternatives to Nonreflective, Disinterested Dealings With Archived Online Data*

Observing online data as it is created affords a sense of community differing from that obtained by simply reading through archived texts. As such, Cherif and Miled (2013) highlighted the netnographic requirement for the researcher to be immersed in an online community for a long enough period of time to become familiar with their culture. Conversely, Healy (2012, p. 103) attempted to maximize observation opportunities and was able to participate online sufficiently to be able to offer a meaningful account of the community.



Active netnography involves the netnographer and other members of online communities contributing to a continuous online conversation by cocreating mutual texts. However, netnographies can, of course, incorporate both passive and active phases. For example, Ewing et al. (2013) began their netnography with a passive, descriptive, and observational phase, before the research team began to elicit more direct interactions with the online community. A further example is provided by Wilkinson and Patterson (2010), who first spent a month casually observing interactions on YouTube, before creating a user profile disclosing their research interests and enabling access to the YouTube community as standard members. Wilkinson then began to embed herself in the community moving through the roles of lurker, newbie, and mingler, subscribing to other members' channels and commenting on their videos. During data collection, they "favorited" key Peppa Pig mash-ups to make them easy to track and collected their discussion threads (including emoticons) as data. Believing that an autonetnography would not adequately address their research aims relating to off-line impact of these mash-ups, they also interviewed mash-up creators online and used video to elicit YouTube chat interviews with mash-up viewers.

A more active netnography offers a better framework for managers and moderators of online communities to assist online communities to pursue their community goals. Successful netnographic interventions will focus on a number of areas to ensure that the community is sustainable and coherent. For example, stimulating conversations on topics significant to community goals, acknowledging emerging trends and their alignment to communal goals, while offering sensitive and prompt replies and follow up to complaints, compliments, and other postings, will encourage emerging and existing key users to continue their interactions while minimizing disruptions to the community. Focusing on passive, nonparticipatory netnography, rather than active, participatory netnography, minimizes opportunities to ethically guide and assist cocreation.

*Analysis, sharing, and checking of data with the online community.* On that note, it is important to remember that active netnographers necessarily share their research role with all other participants who require, create, acquire, and evaluate information in those online conversations. As Costello et al. (2012, p. 3) pointed out, "given online communication means that a mutual text is created, the netnographer shares the research role with participants as they require and acquire information. Both parties contribute to an ongoing dialogue in the online space." Whenever the netnography is regarded as being cocreated with the members of the online community under study, then the sharing and checking of data with community members is an obvious and necessary netnographic step. Unlike passive netnographers, active netnographers expose their frameworks to be challenged by online community members as a means of ensuring the trustworthiness of their study. For example, Cherif and Miled (2013) intuitively understood that the results of their netnography should be made available to the participating community members to elicit their valuable feedback. Similarly,

Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) recruited a key blogger to assist with their data analysis and ensure community viewpoints were reflected in their interpretation of the data.

Another commonly used process to ensure study trustworthiness is that of data triangulation. Brodie et al. (2013) described their data triangulation processes as combining semi-structured telephone and Skype interviews with key bloggers. Borghini et al. (2010) also described multiple sources of data, such as field notes, interview transcripts, photos, and videos, which were classified according to multiple criteria. The subsequent analysis and interpretation of their data included member checking, horizontal and vertical analysis, and continued comparison of results.

However, privacy considerations can limit the extent to which the data can be shared. When reporting the results of their netnography, Ekpo et al. (2014) ensured participant privacy by altering both self-selected usernames and the web addresses of specific sites. Although, Janta, Lugosi, Brown, and Ladkin (2012) did not seek participant consent to use material from publicly available forums, they did assure their anonymity by deleting the member names. Xun and Reynolds (2010) also limited their studies to public forums and assured participant anonymity in subsequent publications by referring to them only as, for example, "Participant X," even though participants had consented to use their pseudonyms during the formal consent process.

### *Netnography as a Standalone Method or in Combination With Others?*

Netnography can be multiphased and can use multiple methods but may only be part of a bigger study. Researchers do, however, differ as to where they define the focus and the boundaries of their netnographies and how they combine these with their other research activities. For example, Füller et al. (2007, p. 62) regarded netnography as a research method, which included data from multiple sources such as participant behavior observations, conversation threads, and interviews with key stakeholders. Similarly, Brodie et al. (2013) perceived their netnography as encompassing both observation of communication in an online community and qualitative in-depth interviews with community members as did Cherif and Miled (2013) and De Valck et al. (2009). Chua and Banerjee (2013) combined qualitative case studies and netnographic methods to analyze how social media was used among customers of Starbucks coffee shops, whereas Borghini et al. (2010, p. 115) characterized their study of street art as a "multisite ethnography and netnography." Fisher and Smith (2011) combined ethnographic, videographic, and netnographic research methods with participant interviews to "capture important aspects of consumer and community co-creation" (p. 335).

Likewise, Xun and Reynolds (2010) used participant observation, nonparticipant observation, and interviews at varying stages of the research to both verify the accuracy of accounts and collect data that contextually represented the community in question. Moreover, the authors regarded the

use of multiple techniques to enhance the power of netnography as a research method.

Others, however, view the use of multiple data collection methods differently. For example, Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2011, p. 182) spoke of moving “from netnography to other forms of research (qualitative interviews with participants, for instance) in order to confirm or reject the positions” identified via their netnography. Similarly, Aitamurto (2013), in her study of a cocreation platform, regarded her participant observation netnography as distinctly separate from other data she collected, such as notes from fieldwork meetings, e-mail responses, diary notes, and e-mail feedback from readers.

The difficulties in handling large volumes of netnographic data can be reduced by computer-supported data analysis (Pollok et al., 2014). However, Sobocinski and Lewandowska (2014, p. 392) regarded netnography as opposed to, rather than complementary to automated quantitative methods, such as social media monitoring. While these “monitoring” techniques can collect and analyze numerical data, such as the number of member visits to a particular site, it cannot analyze the context in which these data are produced. However, others such as Teixeira (2012) suggested there is scope to fruitfully combine netnography and social network analysis, a mathematical method that can detect clusters and subcommunities, while visualizing collaboration networks. Kozinets (2015) concurs, noting that computer-assisted methods are now an essential part of netnography, and the use of digital tools for data analysis and visualization expands the symbolic nature of netnography. However, caution should be applied when considering combined approaches enabling large volumes of netnographic data to be processed, as this may further accelerate the preference for passive netnography and the covert analysis of archival online data, rather than active netnographic studies.

## Conclusions

Netnography is a readily adaptable methodology offering a specific set of steps and analytical approaches, applicable across a wide spectrum of involvement, from lurking to active participation in online conversations and activities. Netnographies can be short and focused on a single community or involve years of research within multiple communities. They utilize videos, images, and sounds as well as textual data. Netnographies can stand alone or be combined with other research methods on online communities, including off-line member interactions.

If netnography is to remain a useful term, it should be clearly distinguishable from other forms of less systematic, pragmatic, and applied research on online communities. On that basis, some supposed passive netnographic studies might, as highlighted by Lugosi et al. (2012), be better classified as IRI or simply as qualitative archival data research of online communities.

As noted earlier, Kozinets (2015) still sees a distinct need for human presence in netnographic enquiry. With this in mind, efforts to support online cocreation and to develop and sustain

vibrant and viable online communities create new opportunities and scope for participatory netnographers. These netnographers focus on gaining entrée into an online community, undertaking participant observation and carefully distinguishing between participant observation and nonparticipant observation, while also sharing and checking their data with members of the online community under study. Perhaps one of the litmus tests for real participant observation should be the “blood, sweat, and tears” invested in sharing with participants in a type of “netnographic slog”, which has characterized our own work in this field; the fruits of which can be many things including joy, fun, frustration, laughter, reflection, resilience, and inspiration. Managers and moderators of online communities are particularly well placed to use and benefit from active, real-time netnographies rather than passive, past-oriented netnographies. This is especially relevant where funds may be tight, staffing limited, and expertise lacking within the organizations who host or support online communities and other social media platforms. Participatory, real-time netnographies provide an ideal mechanism for cocreation, which can help to sustain services that might otherwise be pruned back when resources are constrained. In this way, netnographers can produce their research by legitimately and synonymously contributing to real lives, real places, and real causes. To summarize a parting note from the inventor of netnography is that “the key element is not to forget the participative, reflective, interactive and active part of our research when using the communicative function of social media and the internet” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 97).

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Leesa Costello would like to acknowledge previous funding support from the Australian Research Council Linkage Scheme LP0990807, LP0775520, and LP0453946 which enabled her to develop netnographic expertise.

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