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Netnography – researching the field behind the screen

Abstract

Netnography is a branch of ethnography, developed specifically to study the online interactions of people through participant observation and other methods. Netnography uses Internet communications as a primary source of data. The fact that social media communities have grown so massively means that they are becoming increasingly alluring for researchers. The vast amount of online data affords a readily accessible and potentially fruitful source of data for researchers. However, the accessibility of these sources also gives rise to a number of ethical dilemmas that will be explored in the chapter. Considerations include the role of the researcher, whether online spaces should be considered public or private, and the need to anonymise sources. The chapter also discusses the link to other qualitative methods such as interviews (including online) and also social network analysis (SNA).

The chapter contains practical information on how to conduct a netnography, including how to choose a field site, how and where to collect data from (such as forums, social media etc.), the storage of data, and differences in approaches. It also highlights the importance of using up to date (secondary) sources to blend with new primary data collection. Collecting large volumes of data can provide a challenging analysis task. Thematic analysis of netnography data is explored and the use of qualitative analysis software is also included and the challenges of analysing data. Finally, a netnography case study is presented. The case study illustrates how to conduct a netnography and picks up on all of the issues raised in the chapter in a practical sense.

Keywords (5-10)

Netnography, social media, ethics, social network analysis, qualitative, ethnography, research methods

Author biographies (100-150 words)

Dr. Alex Fenton, is a Doctor of Digital Business at The University of Salford Business School. His research is focused on how innovative digital technologies can improve business processes and impact positively on individuals. Prior to becoming an academic, he ran a digital development company and helped to get Manchester online with the Virtual Chamber in 1997. He is winner of a range of teaching and digital industry awards including innovative lecturer and European Search Awards. He also created a smartphone project for major sports clubs called Fan Fit, which helps fans to get active as an official club app. He also released a book with Routledge in 2020 called Strategic Digital Transformation.

Dr. Keith D. Parry is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Winchester and an Associate Fellow of Western Sydney University. His research interests are based on the sociology of sport, with a focus on sports fandom, health and the spectator experience. His research has made use of innovative methodologies to provide a greater understanding of sports fans and society. Keith's PhD examined the formation of sports heroes within the setting of a new professional sports team (the GWS GIANTS), it investigated when and how heroes are formed, and who (or what) dictates their emergence. His research has examined issues around identity, masculinity, and the conflicts between country and culture in Australia. This research has provided him with a deep insight into both the sociology of sport (and sports fans) and national identity.

Introduction

With the advances in web-based technologies and online social networking, engaging in online communities and communicating through social media have become common practice for individuals in the twenty-first century. This trend has also been accelerated with the social distancing requirements enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this shift, a 'new' form of research methodology has arisen – netnography. Robert Kozinets first developed netnography in 1995 as a branch of ethnography (the study of people), suited to study online communities. Combining the terms 'internet' and 'ethnography' (Kozinets, 2019), netnography is situated within a broader methodological context of online/virtual ethnography and adapts ethnographic methods to fit virtual realms (Whalen, 2018). Netnography allows the rich, diverse online cultures to be explored and explained using naturalistic analysis techniques (Kozinets et al., 2014; Reid and Duffy, 2018). It is:

> a specific type of qualitative social media research. It adapts the methods of ethnography and other qualitative research practices to the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, networks, and systems of social media. (Kozinets, 2019, p. 19)

Morais, Santos, & Gonçalves (2020) claim netnography to be a subgroup of traditional ethnographic research and whilst various terms exist for conducting online ethnography, such as digital, mobile, virtual and other ethnographies, netnography distinguishes itself from these by providing particular standards and ways of operating. Lugosi, Janta, and Watson (2012) sought to provide a distinction between netnography and the broader collection of methods that involve online data collection. They introduced the term investigative research on the Internet (IRI) to highlight that not all online research can be called 'netnography'. These different types of online research will all come with their own ethical dilemmas and practices that researchers will need to navigate (Stainton and Iordanova, 2017). However, Kozinets (2019) stresses that adopting netnography should mean adhering to a specific set of standards and guidelines and comes with its own challenges and skillset.

Netnography is, therefore, distinguished from other online research in that it has an emphasis on online traces, socialites, and interactions. Kozinets (2019) identifies four defining elements that distinguish netnography:

1. Cultural focus – understanding a focal phenomenon, site, topics, or people;
2. Focussing on social media data;
3. Immersive engagement – a reflexive personal involvement in the culture; and
4. 'Netnographic Praxis' – utilising recognised and recommended netnographic research practices that demonstrate an awareness of the conventions, history, and methodological perspectives that are associated with netnography.

Compared to traditional forms of ethnography, netnography could, potentially, be less time consuming, less costly, and can be less obtrusive. While it has origins in the fields of business and marketing, it is now popular in many areas of study (Morais et al., 2020). In

addition, the fact that social media platforms and smartphones are becoming increasingly popular makes them more appealing for researchers (Whalen, 2018), as "a unique and cost-efficient opportunity to examine and under-stand behaviours and beliefs in naturalistic contexts, and to reach populations which may be hard to reach otherwise" (Kantanen and Manninen, 2016, p. 86). The vast amount of online data, in the form of websites, blogs social media accounts, forums etc., affords a readily accessible and potentially fruitful source of data for researchers. However, the accessibility of these sources also gives rise to a number of ethical dilemmas, which we discuss in detail later in this chapter. As Kozinets (2019) highlights, individuals' interactions with online platforms are creating vast amounts of personal data that researchers may be using without their producers' volition or permission. Recent abuses of privacy on popular social media sites and widespread data breaches mean that users are increasingly wary of who has access to their data.

The process

For novice netnographers (and many of those who claim to have used this methods previously), navigating the ethical landscape can be a challenge, particularly as Kozinets (2019) claims that gaining complete consensus for online ethics is impossible in a constantly evolving environment. Online ethics continues to reflect a trade-off between the benefits to society and the projected harm to the individual. Therefore, it is important for researchers to continually read relevant wider research to complement their netnography data collection. This includes research books such as the latest texts and papers on netnography and Internet based research ethics. Social media is an ever-changing subject, so referencing work from many years ago should be done with caution. Understanding the latest developments in social media, your subject and netnography and triangulating this with your netnography data will create a much stronger research design ultimately. In this section we will detail how to get started in conducting a netnography.
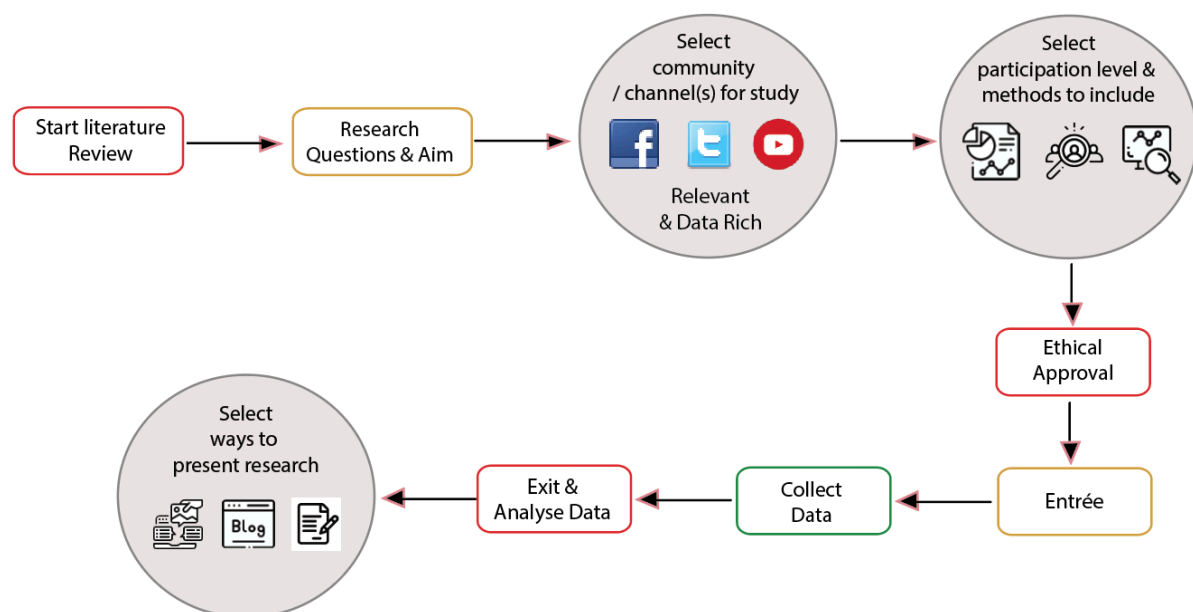

Figure 1 – The process of netnography research

Figure 1 demonstrates a potential approach to conducting a netnography based on an extensive review of literature and the first-hand experience of the chapter authors. Commencing a netnography with a review of the literature on the topics of interest, including recent articles and gaps in the research can be a good way to start. This can help to formulate research questions and the aims of the study. For qualitative research such as netnography, these research questions may start with a 'How' or 'Why' but this would also depend on the study. Equally, the selection points of community (including online channels), participation level (see table 1) and methods (see case study) would be selected in order to answer the research questions. These options are explored in further detail later in this chapter and other sources including Kozinets 2019 and 2015.

Choosing a field site should take into account a range of factors. Kozinets (2010) highlights that channels for netnography need to be relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich at the time of study. These guidelines still stand – ultimately, there must be enough data and interaction. The online field site must be relevant to your study and the research questions you are trying to answer. It must also be ethical for you to access the site, as discussed in the following section. The boundaries of a field site are constantly changing – this is another challenge – so it is important to carefully select what and whom you are studying and be flexible. With all research, goalposts shift and terms and conditions change. The researcher must therefore be prepared for this and be agile. A risk analysis and contingency plans at the start of the study are important. Some events such as a channel closing or a global pandemic such as the recent COVID-19 crisis are unexpected and can affect research dramatically. Researchers must, therefore, be able to pivot their studies and work around these complex shifting situations.

It is often assumed that the readily available nature of Internet environments means that they are public spaces. Indeed, some academics and journalists consider publicly uttered words as freely available and 'fair game' for use in media stories and academic research (Markham, 2012). At this point, it may be useful to draw a distinction between archival material and 'live' discussions. Archival data collection, termed investigative netnography (Kozinets, 2019) is highlighted as a 'grey area', at least until it becomes possible to identify those who posted the data, in which case it is definitely human subject research. For such archival data, Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley (2014) state that the researcher may approach online content as published content. However, it may not be this straightforward. Search engines and data aggregators make online information accessible to a wider audience than the original poster intended, or imagines to have access to it, and some people may post in the public domain without the intention of the material being publicly accessible (Markham and Buchanan, 2012; Stainton and Iordanova, 2017).

In Europe, the 'right to be forgotten' has allowed citizens to request links to pages that contain sensitive or controversial information about them to be removed from search engine results. Protections of personal data been strengthened further under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which governs data creators' rights. When creating a social media account, all users are required to 'read' and sign a variety of terms and conditions that will now detail how their data may be used. Yet users will create data both intentionally and unintentionally and it is important that researchers consider whether those posting content believe it to be private or public (Reid and Duffy,

2018). This difference between the "the ascribed and actual beliefs about social media users regarding the need for permission in the research-related use of the information they share online" is termed The Consent Gap (Kozinets, 2019, p. 173). In other words, just because people 'know' that their postings are public does not mean that they are granting consent for their data to be used in any way.

The tension between whether online spaces are public or private sites is one of the key concerns when deciding to undertake netnographic research and it is a question that remains complex and problematic (Madge, 2007; Stainton & Iordanova, 2017). A private site could be one that requires registration and a log on with a password or that requires approval to join a private online area. Another useful distinction can be around whether the site is viewed as a space, where material is published or if it is a place, where people gather to share and discuss topics online. In the first instance the focus of research is on what has been written and may be considered public, in the second it is on the people themselves that are studied (Madge, 2007). The United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (a government funded body providing funding and support for research) affirm that some online material can be considered as available for research but highlight that even then the situation may not be as clear-cut as a simple binary between public or private.

Significantly, Moreno, Goniu, Moreno, & Diekema (2013) point to federal and state court law in the United States (US) that has determined that under Facebook's privacy policy, users cannot have a reasonable expectation of privacy when they post information on their pages, despite protection under the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution. The ruling stated that "Facebook privacy policies plainly state that information users' post may be shared with others, and that information sharing is the very nature and purpose of these SNSs [social networking sites]" (Moreno et al., 2013, p. 710) – serving as a stark warning for all social media users. Therefore, a privacy setting that is set to public may be considered as a type of proxy for consenting for others to see their data and for researchers to use it (Kozinets, 2019). It should also be noted that GDPR legislation does allow restrictions on data use to be overridden when data is collected for research purposes that are in the public interest. There is one large caveat in that recognised ethical standards for scientific research must be followed (Kozinets, 2019).

Ethics

In a review of 52 articles that made use of netnographic methods in information systems journals, Tuikka, Nguyen, and Kimppa (2017) found that only a minority made reference to ethical guidelines regarding their netnographic choice of methods. In fact, the evolving nature of research in this area means that institutional review boards and ethics committees along with funding bodies (Taylor and Pagliari, 2018), who are often more training in medical research methods (Bruckman, 2002), are seen to be playing 'catchup' and yet to fully understand some of the complexities and implications of this form of research – as if often the case with methodological innovation. This situation fosters the mistrust, antagonism, and division between researchers and ethics regulators (Nind et al., 2013). As such, Stainton and Iordanova (2017) have called for the development of new and diverse ethical approaches for online research methods. Nevertheless, research practice should continue to be underpinned with the same basic ethical principles as any other form of social research, namely the minimising of harm and the concept of informed consent.

Markham and Buchanan (2012) identify that researchers should ensure respect for persons, justice, and beneficence. They capture the complexities and the difficulty in resolving them:

> Although we as researchers might like straightforward answers to questions such as "Will capturing a person's Tweets cause them harm?" or "Is a blog a public or private space?" … the uniqueness and almost endless range of specific situations defy attempts to universalise experience or define in advance what might constitute harmful research practice. We take the position that internet research involves a number of dialectical tensions that are best addressed and resolved at the stages they arise in the course of a research study (Markham and Buchanan, 2012, p. 7).

In practical terms, harm can arise in a number of ways such as a feeling of violation when unwitting participants find out that their words have been used and quoted in research without their knowledge or permission. Kozinets challenges researchers to consider how they would feel if they saw their name or personal information used in a research study or if social media data, rather than academic outputs, were quoted without their knowledge. From this moral standpoint, researchers have the chance to be an ambassador of goodwill or the opposite, an ignorant exploiter (Kozinets, 2019). In addition, any academic interpretation of their words can also result in online abuse as a result of dissemination of their comments if participants' identities are not protected. There may even be financial or employment-related harm if their comments are seen to be injurious towards their employers. Furthermore, there can be an increased risk of harm to the *researchers* as "online subjects talk back, interact with us, read our research, criticize our work, all while eroding the walls we build around ourselves as objective outsiders studying the virtual worlds of others" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 38).

As early as the mid 1990s, King (1996) provided procedures for researchers studying online communities, which primarily focussed on ensuring that all identifiable data was removed. In a more recent attempt to navigate this potential ethical minefield, Kozinets (2019) proposes a series of ethical guidelines for those conducting netnographies. Although there have been calls for these guidelines to be revised and made less restrictive (Langer and Beckman, 2005), Kozinets (2019) vehemently rejects these calls as a fundamental aspect of netnography and, in his latest book advocates for ethical procedures that might seem overly restrictive by today's standards. The procedures that Kozinets outlines are followed by many netnographers and serve to highlight areas of particular ethical concern. In his most recent edition of his text (2019), he provides a process flowchart that walks researchers through the ethical considerations when planning a netnography. This flowchart and chapter provides perhaps the clearest ethical guidelines for netnography or (arguably) any kind of online ethnography to date.

Another ethical challenge with netnography is the question of whether the research involves human subjects or not as traditional notions of human subjects fail to characterise adequately online users (Bruckman, 2002). In traditional ethnography, it is much clearer that the subjects are human but when examining online spaces it may not be clear if what is being analysed should be treated solely as text, robots or as human subjects (Kantanen and Manninen, 2016). The question of whether one's online information is an extension of the self is challenging and raises the question of whether "the connection between one's online data and his or her physical person enable psychological, economic, or physical, harm?"

(Markham and Buchanan, 2012, p. 7). Kozinets (2019) suggests that netnography should be treated as if it involves human subjects and sent for ethical review. He reasons that as soon as any data, whether archival or current, can be linked to the producer, either directly or indirectly, it becomes human subjects research. The interaction with human subjects is more obvious when researchers begin to post or reply to online comments (online participant observation), or when they send a direct message through social media, email or interview participants, but only a smaller proportion of netnography research involves interactions in this manner as discussed.

Regarding minimising harm, traditional ethnographic or interview-based research typically employs pseudonymisation, protecting individuals' names during any dissemination by anonymising data so that no individuals are identified. In such a study, direct quotes, drawn from verbatim transcripts of interviews, are typically used to provide the rich data that supports discussions but only the researchers should (theoretically) know who made the particular comments. However, if data is derived from online sources, while it is possible to remove both real names and/or online usernames from any quoted raw data, relatively simple data mining via most online search engines can reveal the source of most data that does not have a barrier such as a login to access it.

There is growing evidence that individuals can be identified from anonymised online data (Markham and Buchanan, 2012) and it has been claimed that the use of quotes makes the data source so identifiable that they negate or render meaningless the use for pseudonyms (Tuikka, Nguyen & Kimpaa, 2017). King (1996) originally argued against the use of direct quotes from online discussion forums, while others claim that false details can and should be deliberately introduced so that even the participant cannot identify their presence or words (Madge, 2007). Going one step further, it has been suggested that *fabrication*, defined as "the activity of combining, molding, and/or arranging elements into a whole for a particular purpose" (Markham, 2012, p. 338), may be the most appropriate method for protecting unwitting participants from harm. Such fabrication may involve the creation of composite accounts or fictional narratives but they should remain true to the original data sources. To further 'muddy the waters', the use of online pseudonyms can create a perception that actual identities are already protected. However, these names can often be readily traced to an individual and in some cases have been commoditised by the user, becoming a valued identity (Bruckman, 2002; Kozinets et al., 2014). Therefore, it could be harmful to an individual if the publication of research means that a quote from the researcher's critical reading appears when the individual's online alias is entered into a search engine (Kozinets et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to minimise the 'reverse-searchability' of data by considering steps such as changing wordings or even altering published images (Kozinets, 2019).

Bruckman (2002) proposes that anonymity, through disguising of names and identifiable information from the Internet site, can occur on a continuum, from no disguising to heavy disguise. At the 'no disguise' level, participants are easily identifiable, while they should not be identifiable under a 'heavy disguise'. In between these two bookends, the subjects may be identifiable to members of the community but not to outsiders. She proposes four 'spots' along this continuum that can be adopted:

Disguise of raw data	Approach
None	Real names and pseudonyms are used with permission but harmful details are omitted;
Light	The source is named but names, identifiable details and any harmful details are removed. Verbatim quotes may be used;
Moderate	A halfway house approach, adopting some elements of light disguise and some from the heavy disguise that follows;
Heavy	The source is not named and names, pseudonyms and identifiable details are changed. Verbatim quotes are not used if they could be traceable to the source and fabrication may be employed. However, details that *may* be harmful to the subject may be included because identification should not be possible.

Table 1: Levels of disguise adapted from Bruckman (2002)

It should also be noted that some commentators question the trustworthiness of social media content, arguing that it is not representative of the wider population or that the potential anonymity of users allows them to speak with impunity. To gain consent and to address the trustworthiness of the data, some researchers request legal names and signed consent forms, or combine online and offline methods. While knowing a user's 'real-life' name and gaining more information about their offline lives may enhance perceptions of netnography's credibility, it also brings further requirements and responsibility for protecting identities that are faced by all social researchers who obtain data from human subjects (Kozinets et al., 2014).

Copyright laws may come into play when researchers want to publish an artefact (such as a picture or other material) from an online space. However, Kozinets et al. (2014, p. 270) state that "this issue is so complex and dynamic that questions are best handled by experts (e.g., a university's lawyers advising about local copyright restrictions and fair use guidelines) on a case-by-case basis". In addition, netnographers should be mindful of the aforementioned terms and conditions that govern online spaces and platforms to ensure that their use of the materials for research purposes does not contravene these.

Entrée

The process of entering a community known as entrée, has been much discussed in ethnography. Kozinets (2015) describes it as the most sacred part of netnography, where researchers gain access from the outside, to increasingly inside of networks. Kozinets (2015, p.267) uses the term virtual verisimilitude. This refers to netnography researchers being always open, honest and willing to share a public side of themselves on social media. Transparency, truth and honesty are, therefore, fundamental parts of netnography and the personal brand of the researcher. Netnographers should, therefore, ensure that there is clear reference to being a researcher in their profile or bio for the relevant site and in regular status updates so that other users are aware that research may be conducted.

Outlining their profile and research on their own website can also help with the entering (entrée) process and virtual verisimilitude. It is recommended therefore that netnographers err on the side of caution on the private-versus-public medium issue. In the case of private data (needing registration for example), researchers should comply with the terms of the site and seek permission from those that govern the social media platform.

For some researchers, obtaining consent has been seen as a "a nicety rather than a necessity" (Nind et al., 2013, p. 659) and university ethics committees have previously signed off on studies of online communities that did not disclose that research was taking place and that did not seek informed consent (Madge, 2007). There is some disagreement on the issue of whether or not to reveal the identity of the participant observer and the purpose of the study to some or all of the people being observed. Those who have argued against these steps, such as Langer and Beckman (2005), have claimed that in some situations covert studies are ethical and a legitimate approach to adopt. There are examples of covert, undercover research and ethnographies in the literature justified in order for researchers to blend in and keep a naturalistic setting (Leigh, 2006). In this manner, ethical reporting laxity has been accepted by journals and reviewers in the past but Kozinets (2019) argues that it should not continue in the future. As the founder of netnography, he has laid out ethical guidelines that set it apart from other online methodologies that, he claims, do not have pre-existing standards or procedures. He asks researchers who refuse to adhere to the agreed-upon procedures to refrain from calling their work a netnography as he claims that ethical procedures should be at the core of netnography (Kozinets, 2019). Therefore, it is worth considering if the information that has been shared is factual and everyday conversation or if it is personal and sensitive in nature (Stainton and Iordanova, 2017). Regardless of one's take on his stance, it is certainly morally justifiable to heed his call for the foregrounding of empathy; putting ourselves in the shoes of others, doing no harm.

In some instances researchers who post in online spaces may even want their comments to be fully attributed as it may generate additional engagement with their content or welcome publicity. Despite repeatedly calling for researchers to obtain permission from online community members to use specific materials in the dissemination of findings, Kozinets (2019) also notes that, practically, gaining informed consent may, in some situations, be problematic. He proffers the example of researchers following the #metoo hashtag on Twitter and the practical impossibility of obtaining consent from all those who have used the hashtag. It is worth considering whether it is reasonable (and ethical) to consider the use of a well-known hashtag as evidence that the user wishes to join in with a wider, public conversation and is providing de facto consent for their words to be seen and analysed? Yet, in such a situation, the first time that an online contributor is likely to be aware that their words and thoughts are being analysed for research purposes is when (or if) they read them in the resulting dissemination. As such, some netnographic practitioners advocate for the full disclosure of the researcher's purpose and presence (Kozinets, 2002; Whalen, 2018). While it is possible to collect data by 'lurking' – observing but not contributing – however, lurking netnographers can miss parts of the phenomenon that are not publicly visible and do not experience the embedded cultural understanding (Reid and Duffy, 2018). Kozinets (2015) has argued that active participation in online communities by researchers is more respectful of the participants as it means being empathetic towards the community, following the communal rules, and 'living' as a typical member of the community.

Nevertheless, Whalen (2018) identifies that, in a content analysis of tourism and hospitality papers claiming to have used netnography, over eighty per cent had utilised non-participative methods of data collection. This is perhaps a quicker, less intrusive and easier approach, but could potentially lead to less immersion and understanding of a community than online participant observation (Kozinets, 2015).

Data Collection and Storage

According to Kozinets (2019) there are four data collection operations to pick from in netnography; capture, save and print, copy and paste, and scraping. Each of these results in different types of data types but all are searchable and all serve a variety of purposes. Capturing data via a screenshot creates an image file of the content viewed on the particular device, including image, text, URL, and anything else on the screen at that time. This option is suitable for smaller amounts of visual data but it can be time consuming to both capture and then transfer and store data using this method and it can be problematic to analyse. Saving and printing is an option that is available on most browsers. Although this method captures all of the information on a particular webpage at a point in time, and not just that displayed on the screen, the formatting can often be distorted. The output from saving and printing can be in a variety of formats such as an Adobe Portable Document File (PDF) or the html portion of the webpage. Copy and Paste is the best-known method for capturing and reproducing data. It allows specific sections of data to be copied, thus reducing the amount of data that is saved. This option is again time-consuming and may not be suitable for large datasets. As much of the context will be lost, Copy and Paste may only be suitable for small amounts of textual data. Data scraping is the most complex of these methods as it relies on the use of a computer programme to automatically save data from an online source and present it in a particular format. Scraping can be quick and some programmes are able to capture text and images. This method can quickly and easily capture large volumes of data. Social media monitoring (SMM) tools can also be used to mine keywords and phrases to generate sets of structured data; with a number of commercial tools available to assist with data collection (Reid and Duffy, 2018).

As with any research method, data security is important. Data should always be saved and stored in a secure manner and netnographers should be mindful of issues relating to data storage. In recent years, online data has been vulnerable to hacking attempts and requests for access by security agencies and governments (Kozinets, 2019). As a minimum it is recommended that data be anonymised and then stored on a password protected cloud-based storage system.

Data Analysis

Netnographies typically use qualitative data and seek deep understandings of the cultures being studied, therefore, qualitative data analysis methods are used to interrogate the data. As such, the six-step thematic analysis procedure developed by Braun and Clark (2006) is widely utilised. Indeed, Whalen (2018) notes that thematic analysis is one of the most commonly employed data analysis methods associated with netnography but also cites the use of discourse, content, and textual analyses in addition to mapping and grounded theory.

However, five data analysis operations for netnography have also been proposed (Kozinets, 2019):

1. Collating – gathering data in a form that can then be coded;
2. Coding – breaking down data into chunks and assigning meaningful labels to these;
3. Combining – merging lower-order codes to produce higher-order codes;
4. Counting – quantifying various elements to describe and relate them, as is done in content analysis; and
5. Charting – presenting data in a visual format, such as word clouds.

Netnography can generate large volumes of data, particularly when examining social media channels. Therefore, NVivo and other qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) packages are often used to code data. Although these packages have been argued to "remove the researcher from the process [of data analysis]" (Whalen, 2018, p. 3434), Kozinets (2019, p.321) provides a detailed and persuasive discussion of why this viewpoint may be misguided. However, it is worth noting that such software should be used to assist researchers and not to replace all human involvement; manual coding is still widely employed.

Approach	When suitable	Pros	Cons
Hardcopy – printing out copies of data and manually highlighting theses and links.	Small datasets.	Allows the researcher to get 'close' to the data. A simple method.	Requires data to be downloaded and stored on a computer and then printed. Requires a familiarity with the data and good organisational skills.
Word-processing – using in-built operations such as cut and paste, search, highlighting, commenting etc. on digital copies of data.	Small- to medium-sized data sets (under 200,00 words of text)	Can again allow the researcher to get 'close' to the data	Ungainly and inefficient with larger datasets. This approach does not aide analysis.
Qualitative Data Analysis programmes	Mid- to large-sized datasets	Large volumes of data in various formats (text, images, videos) can be quickly analysed. Some packages can produce sentiment analysis and further save time.	Programmes can be expensive to buy and do not always allow data to be imported from different packages. Interpretation and insightful analysis may be lacking.

Table 2: Approaches to data coding, adapted from Kozinets (2019).

Case study

In this final section, we bring together the chapter by presenting a case study of a netnography conducted between 2014 and 2018. This study focussed on football fan communities on social media and used a combination of participant observation, interviews and social network analysis (SNA) as part of a netnography. These methods and their blend are also described in this section.

Case Background

Major football clubs brands have hundreds of millions of online followers from around the world using social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. These channels allow fans to consume and interact with clubs and fellow fans from anywhere in the world at any time. The study aimed to fill the lack of research on football fans on social media whilst providing insights for social media managers. The table below helps to communicate the research problem, research questions, literature, data sources / types and contributions in this case.

Research Problem	Research Questions	Literature	Data sources and types of collection	Contributions to knowledge/ practice
Literature calls for more studies on digital marketing and football	How is social media being used by football clubs and their fans?	Literature on both social media and digital marketing within sports clubs and other relevant organisations	Participant observation and interview	A strong contribution to theory and practice applied to sports business
Existing research on brand communities focus on big brands	How does social media influence brand communications of football clubs?	Brand awareness and brand community studies, tribal marketing	SNA, participant observation and interview	Greater understanding about the impact of social media for smaller brands
Lack of studies on football fans relating to football fan communications and segmentation	How can social media communications be managed according to fan segmentation	Other relevant studies on football fans, segments, digital communities, marketing and football fan segmentation	SNA, participant observation and interview	Contribution to digital marketing, IS and sport business literature
Growth of social media means that there are a lack of studies in social capital &social media communities	What is the role of social capital in football online communities?	Social capital and social capital applied to online communities and sports	Participant observation and interview	Contribution to the understanding of the role of social capital for social media marketers and the academic literature

Table 3 – Table outlining the research problems, questions, literature, data and contributions

The author is a football fan and social media researcher. Understanding and being a fan of the subject matter can be an advantage, particularly if online participant observation is used. The example case uses a netnography based on Salford City Football Club (SCFC) as a vehicle for the study. At the time of investigation, SCFC were a non-league football club in England but became professional for the first time in their history in the 2019/20 season. SCFC were chosen as an interesting case of a club that were increasingly using social media to engage with a global fanbase. SCFC had new owners in 2013/14 who were former Manchester United players (known as The Class of '92). The new owners were also well-known celebrities and some (such as Gary Neville - @GNev2) were prominent social media users. In the period of study, the club had announced that they intended to use social media extensively to become a digital football club to reach new fans locally and internationally.

An initial literature review revealed gaps and calls for further research in academic journals on social media and football (for example Kuzma et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2014). The study also used a lens on the data of social capital theory. Whilst there are a number of definitions of social capital in the literature, in this study it refers to leveraging the trust and relationships for positive gains in a network. Putnam (2000) viewed positive social capital as crucial for successful communities and societies to survive and prosper.
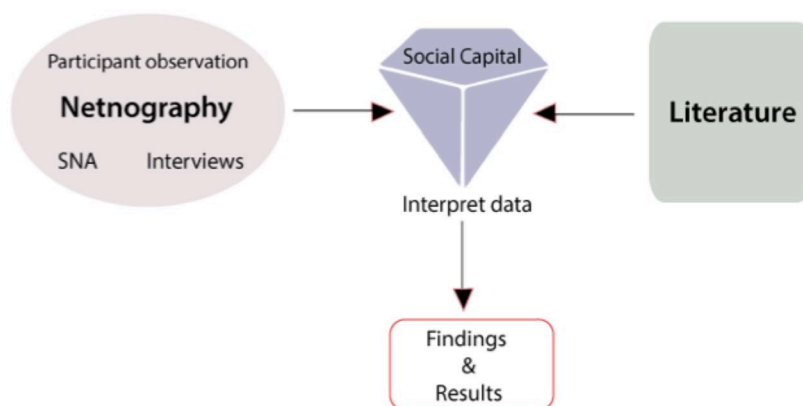

Figure 2 – Conceptual model of the netnography case study

The situation with SCFC was therefore ideal for a netnographic study whereby there were practical / managerial insights and a contribution to the academic literature. This case therefore used participant observation, interviews (including online interviews) and SNA as part of a netnography. SNA for social media allows tools and techniques to be used to map out networks as described below. A combination or 'blend' of methods can, therefore, be an important way to see a broader picture and for research to progress due to the diversity and richness of approaches, answering the research questions in the study. The term blended methods can be used to refer to overlapping and complimentary methods (Fenton and Procter, 2019). A blend involves a combination that can enhance the quality of the individual components and can be designed to work together, informing each other to create greater insights.
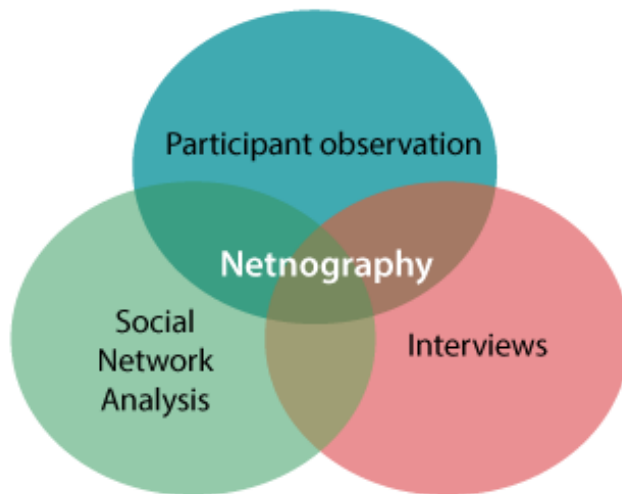
Figure 3 – Showing three blended methods as part of a netnography

Participant observation
Participant observation is a crucial part of ethnography (Hammersley, 2018; Van Maanen, 2011). It allows the researcher to be immersed in the day to day lives of people. Online participation is also key to netnography using online traces from websites, social networks, and other digital platforms (Kozinets, 2015, p.66). Kozinets (2015, p.266) also recommends this strategy as part of netnography.

Social Network Analysis (SNA)
SNA is not exclusively focussed on social media research. In fact, it has a long history of mapping out networks and people. With the rise of social media, digital tools for SNA have also grown. Whilst known as a quantitative method, SNA can also be used for qualitative or mixed methods research. "The social science approach to SNA attempts to develop a qualitative understanding of node and network properties" (Williams et al., 2015, p.1118). Increasingly, SNA has been combined with qualitative methods such as netnography (Kozinets, 2015). It has been utilised qualitatively as part of a blended methods approach (Fenton and Procter, 2019). It can also be used to:
   o Identify "bounded social networks for netnographers to engage with and investigate" (Kozinets 2015. p.63)

   o Find out how people connect with each other over time (Edwards, 2010)

   o Identify "influential ones in a network" (Kozinets 2015. p.64)

SNA in this case provided a deeper understanding of the connections and flows of information and helped to identify people for further study. It is notable that ethnography and netnography include participant observation and usually interviews (Kozinets, 2015). The addition of SNA as a method is an acceptable part of netnography but this also takes additional time so should be carefully considered.

Figure 4 – An example of an SNA diagram from NodeXL / Gephi with overlaid Tweets

Interviews

"Interviews, along with observations and participant observation, form the core data collection activities of qualitative research" (Belk et al., 2012, p.31). According to Qu and Dumay (2011), research interviews are one of the most important qualitative methods and are often used for ethnographic research. Interviews are used to gather qualitative data by conversing with relevant people within the research study. They are often used as part of a case study or ethnography as a way to gather rich information and are often used in conjunction with netnography (Kozinets, 2015). Interviews were an important part of this case in order to broaden the understanding of the insight gathered from participant observation.

Interviews also enabled more targeted data collection and added another layer of meaning to the online participant observations in this case. It was not always possible to interview the person required due to time, availability or geography. Once a person had refused to be interviewed or declined permission to use a social media post anonymously, the researcher respected this and gathered data from elsewhere. All potential participants were treated with the greatest respect and if they refused an interview, the researcher sought other ways to bridge the gap in understanding including other interviewees, other methods or the literature.

Initiating (entrée)

Once an initial literature review had been conducted on social media, football fans, social capital and netnography, the researcher applied for ethical approval to conduct a netnography study including online participant observation, interviews and SNA. SCFC were present at the time primarily on a website forum, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and this is where most of the conversations were happening at the start of the study in 2014. The researcher set up a website, www.alexfenton.co.uk for his research, which detailed who he was, what the research was about and how to get involved. He also crafted a two page information sheet and interview consent form, which was also added to the website. In terms of entrée, the researcher started first by listening and taking screenshots of key

moments that would help to understand the research questions. This participant observation diary with notes was stored in a secure document. After initial conversations with SCFC, the researcher then posted to the SCFC website forum, Facebook and Twitter pages announcing the research and asking for fans to get in touch if they would like to participate in an interview. This strategy, whilst important for entrée, was not particularly successful in gaining interviewees, but it did serve an important purpose in terms of virtual verisimilitude, ethics and promotion of the study. The researcher was not a genuine fan of SCFC and it would be unwise to pretend otherwise, so this transparency and declaration as a researcher at a local university was also important to the ethics and integrity of the study and trust of the participants.

Investigating, Immersing and reflecting

The channels used in this study for online participant observation included:
- Twitter – SCFC account, fans, players and other relevant people

- Facebook - official and fans groups

- YouTube – SCFC have a dedicated channel, where fans and opposing fans also comment

- Club forums and websites - SCFC have an unofficial forum and there are other rival club and league forums

Interviews as part of the netnography were also seen as an important way to find out more about the people and communities under study. The blend of the three methods helped to understand the bigger picture and answer the research questions. The researcher interviewed a number of SCFC staff and fans along with some social media managers connected to sport, whilst continuing to listen and participate on the SCFC social media channels. The data gathering was continuous and there were 35 interviews in total with 25 people who were officially interviewed as participants for this study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into text. The interviews had three main time periods at the start, middle and end of the study, whereas the online participant observation was on-going.

Interpreting and analysing

Interpreting the data was an on-going process. Field notes were constantly added to the data and then at particular points, the data was analysed and written up more formally. All of the data was ultimately added to qualitative analysis software NVivo and coded using a thematic approach. This helped to make meaning from the data and write up the findings and discussion.

Communicating

Communicating the results of research in different ways is an important aspect of netnography. Interviewees in the study were not interested in reading a transcript of their interview, but were often more interested to read blog posts of the findings of the study as it progressed. These blog posts were written in an accessible and interesting style to appeal to a wider audience. In addition, the research was communicated at conference presentations, video recordings and research papers to academics.

This case study created a much greater understanding of fans, their culture, language, needs and wants relating to the research questions. Social capital can be built and sustained with fans through social media. Smartphone owning fans around the world were following SCFC and although the majority were lurkers (listening but not interacting), they were still very keen to build relationships with the club and other fans. It is important therefore for any brand to use social media to engage with and personalise social media content, including reaching out directly to fans, building trust and answering social media posts. If social capital is nurtured through brand communities, this can increase engagement and ultimately this can have positive commercial gains including sponsorships and brand value.

Summary

Netnography is distinct from other types of online ethnography because of its focus on phenomena, sites, topics or people relating to online traces. It involves levels of immersive engagement to create reflexive involvement in culture. Conducting a netnography means that you follow specific and up to date processes (Kozinets, 2019).

Informed consent and ethics in Internet based people research is a complex and shifting landscape, but a unique aspect of netnography is that there are specific ethical guidelines provided, which include being open and honest. Researchers can choose their level of impressiveness and a combination of methods as the best way to answer their research questions – but online participation is a fundamental aspect of netnography data collection.

Whilst it is quite common to combine interviews with online participant observation, the addition of SNA to support a blended approach presents new opportunities. SNA can be used to identify participants and understand the boundaries of networks. Whilst interviews can provide targeted data in order to answer the research questions, the blend of methods can be very valuable in deriving rich insights. Description and analysis are an important aspect of netnography research and it is possible to use manual qualitative coding or use software to analyse the data.

Netnography research creates rich data, understanding and analysis and a miriad of opportunities to present findings in different ways from blog posts, market research papers, conferences and much more. Netnography, therefore, creates opportunities for rich research through its processes to explore the almost limitless online world.

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