An Invaluable Compendium of Netnography as a Qualitative Social Media Research Tool

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Abstract

Purpose

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of Netnography as a research method. In addition, several instances of netnographic investigations in social sciences will be discussed in the study. Netnography is far less time consuming in terms of data collection; however, it requires a new set of skills due to the specificities of computer-mediated communication and its dramatically increased field site accessibility, which necessitates choices about field sites and decisions about the types of data to gather and analyze.

Design/Methodology/Approach

This paper focuses on the methodological specificities of Netnography, focusing on its context of application, the method's definition, and the research design: from the objectives and research questions' setting, to site selection and cultural entrée, to the type of data to be collected, to the way to classify, analyze, and represent them. Furthermore, it is significantly less intrusive than conventional ethnography since it allows for researcher invisibility: cyberspace permits researchers to remain invisible to those being watched. This enables for the documentation of informants' clear language without the risk of obtrusiveness and disruption.

Originality/Value

The paper suggests that Netnography and Ethnography are both realistic and unobtrusive ways of researching social processes in their everyday settings. They are multi-method, methodologically flexible, and adaptable, not restricting themselves to certain processes but rather being open to field challenges. However, there are several significant differences between Netnography and Ethnography. In terms of accessibility and study design, online entrée differs from face-to-face entrée.

Keywords

Netnography, Ethnography, Online communities, Qualitative methods, Social research methods, and Cultural netnography.

1. Preamble

Netnography is a subset of qualitative social media research. It employs ethnographic methodologies to comprehend social interaction in current digital communication situations. Netnography may be defined as a specific set of actions for conducting research within and about social media. Netnography is a subset of research procedures based on participant observation for data collection, analysis, research ethics, and portrayal. A considerable proportion of data in netnography originates and emerges as digital traces of spontaneously occurring public conversations collected by modern communications networks. These talks are used as data in netnography. It is an interpretative research approach that applies anthropology's traditional, in-person participant observation methodologies to the study of interactions and experiences manifested through digital communications (Kozinets 1998).

The term netnography is a portmanteau combining "Internet" or "network" with "ethnography". Netnography was developed in 1995 by marketing professor Robert Kozinets as a means of analyzing online fan interactions pertaining to the Star Trek brand. The method's applicability ranged from marketing and consumer research to education, library and information sciences, hospitality, tourism, computer science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, urban studies, leisure and gaming studies, and human sexuality and addiction research.

Netnography is a research approach for examining online consumer culture. It tries to deconstruct the cultural norms and expressions that impact consumption choices within the groups under study by examining organically occurring online debates and events. It considers social media to be much more than likes, reposts, influencers, and keyword occurrences. To ethnographers, social media are expressions of cultural phenomena, making them perfect sites to gain a rich and contextualized understanding of consumers. To make sense of such cultural data, the researcher acts like a fly on the wall, observing but without meddling.

Almost every product category, from diapers to cosmetics, cancer treatments to gardening equipment (to name a few that have been investigated using Decipher Analytics), is the topic of intensive online discussion involving significant numbers of customers. The same is true for larger hunting grounds" such as health, attractiveness, togetherness, and so on. Deep insights about customers may be obtained by examining these online interactions, which can be extremely beneficial for marketing, product, innovation, and strategy managers.

Findings from netnographic studies, being a qualitative method, are not necessarily typical of the offline communities that correlate to those investigated online. Such data must be gathered from different sorts of investigations. Instead, the strength of netnography is that it generates insights that are not easily

accessible through conventional approaches. Furthermore, online groups are frequently one step ahead of mainstream consumers, making netnography beneficial for detecting possibilities early.

Netnography is significantly distinct from content analysis. While content analysis turns qualitative information into quantitative data, netnography seeks a qualitative knowledge of the group or issue in question. Nonetheless, quantitative approaches may be utilized to assist and supplement the qualitative research process. This allows for netnographic studies of communities and information sources that are hundreds or even millions of times bigger than what is achievable with the old, purely qualitative technique.

The goal of data-driven netnography is to assist the researcher in orienting themselves in a big body of knowledge. The ethnographer might avoid spending time filtering through the noise by disclosing the structure of the discourse, such as common subjects, themes, and codes. It also allows the ethnographer to use both bottom-up and top-down search techniques: becoming acquainted with the content by studying topics that emerge from the data is often most relevant at the start of the research process, whereas finding content related to a specific topic of interest can be more useful later on.
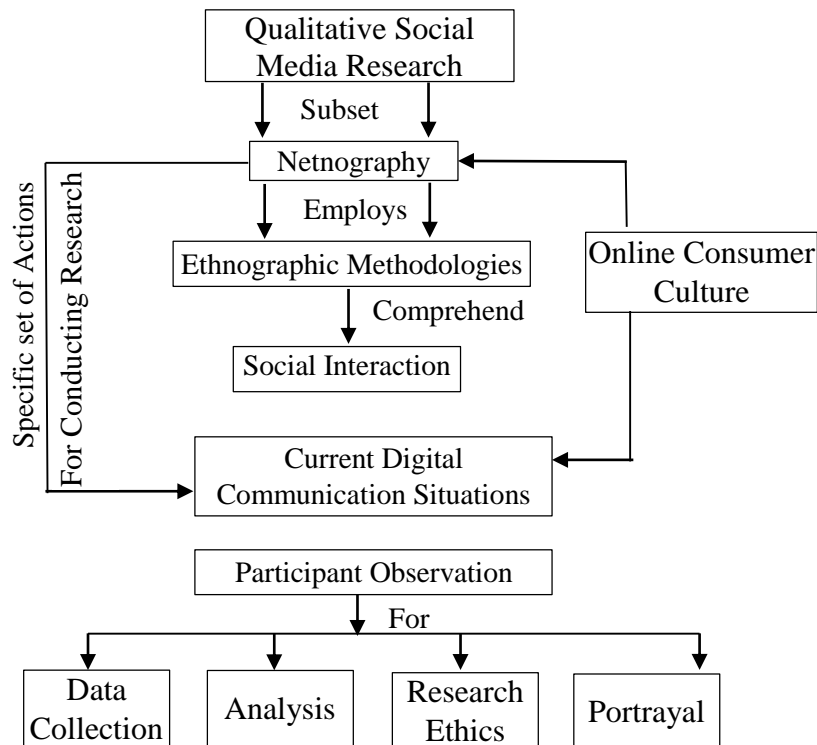
Source: Author's Compilation

Figure 1:- Netnography as a Media Tool

2. Data-driven Netnography Process

To start working with data-driven netnography, follow the five steps below.

2.1 Define the Research Question and Scope

Make sure you understand why you want to study what you want to study. This influences the source selection and research process. Are you curious about... a phenomenon? "Energy boost," "sunbathing," "beauty on the go," and "quality meals" are some examples from our customer initiatives. These broad themes tend to yield more relevant insights than restricted and specialized issues. If the research is centered on a phenomena, it is typically preferable to analyze relevant debates everywhere they occur on the internet rather than confining to certain sources. We used data from specific parenting forums, for example, while studying parenting trends and tribes.

- Is it a consumer group? Chinese visitors to Germany, parents with young children, cystic fibrosis patients, and Hi-Fi nerds are all examples from our research. When a consumer group is the center of a study, we are interested in everything they say, not simply in regard to a certain issue. When we studied cystic fibrosis patients, for example, we wanted to know what their typical day looks like, what support structures they have access to, how they alleviate their illness's symptoms, how closely they adhere to their prescribed treatments, and whether they experiment with non-prescribed substitutes. Despite the fact that only 70,000 people worldwide have been diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, they have formed a robust online community with millions of messages.

2.2 Locate the Community and Relevant Discussions

The sources to be used are determined by the research issue and the scope of the project. The majority of publicly available cultural data falls into the categories listed below.

- Internet forums devoted to certain themes. There are forums dedicated to travel, fashion, health, family life, and practically every other topic imaginable. Forums are frequently used to bring together people who have the same interest, and conversations flow freely as people debate issues of interest and trade advice. The enormous volume of unnecessary material is a difficulty, since talks tend to get off subject.
- Online product reviews within a product area of interest. Review analysis can assist the ethnographer learn what consumers value in items and what problems they see.

- Posts on social media. When compared to online forums, huge social networks have a far larger audience. Popular material spreads quickly and far because of the opportunity to repost others' postings. Geographers may investigate debates in big and small social groups using social networks. The fact that social media posts typically provide short narratives makes them suited for examination.

- Platforms for exchanging images. Images demonstrate what individuals wish to share. They enable us to investigate signaling and status - how individuals want to be regarded and what they consider cool, attractive, and intriguing. Images are very effective for researching phenomena involving objects and physical space. For example, in a netnographic research to uncover developing breakfast notions, we investigated photos to determine what breakfast truly means. We were amazed by the wide range of what, how, and where breakfast is prepared and enjoyed. These discoveries would not have come from reading alone.

- Platforms for sharing videos. A video is a potential gold mine of customer information if a picture is worth a thousand words. Videos of people displaying what their houses look like gave crucial information in a netnographic research regarding what makes a decent home.

2.3 Collect and Prepare the Data

Data driven netnography necessitates the collection of data to be investigated. When determining the downloading criterion, it is preferable to be overly generous rather than too stringent. The most essential thing is to ensure that all pertinent information is downloaded. Irrelevant data can be simply sorted out afterwards.

A wide number of helpful sources are accessible for keyword-based downloading straight inside the app in Decipher Analytics. If you need data from other sources, please contact us and we will connect you with one of our data vending partners.

After downloading the data, your first step will be to perform operations to clean and organize the data. To create more relevant and manageable chunks of text, duplicates should be deleted, date formats should be standardized, and texts should be separated. All of these precautions are simple to put in place using Decipher Analytics' smart text cleaning procedures.
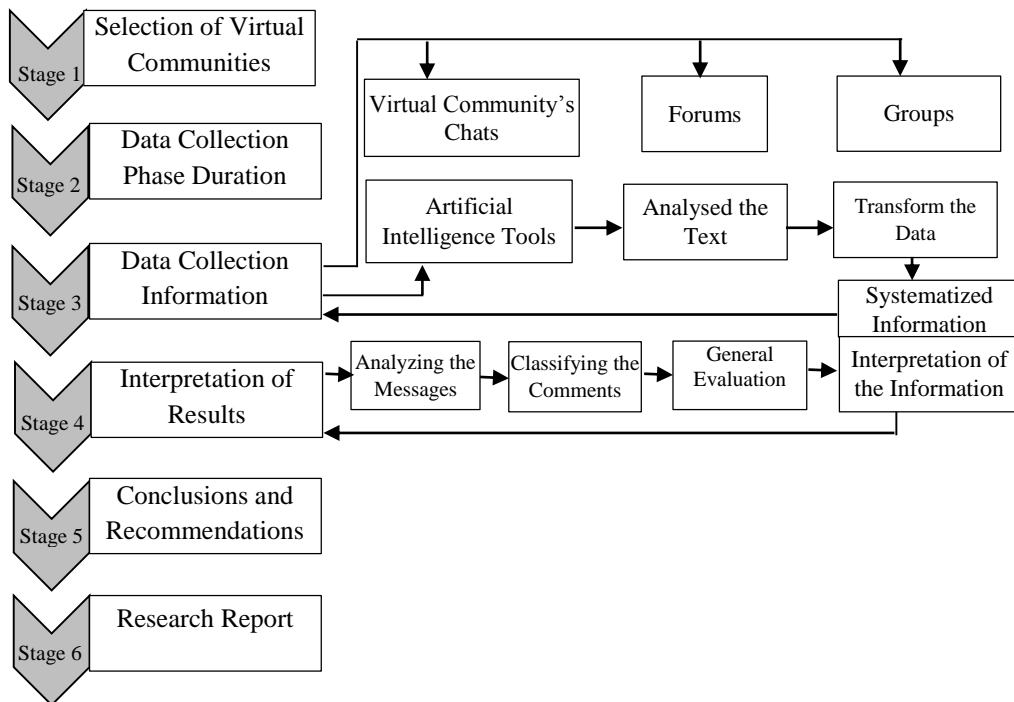
Source: Author's Compilation

Figure 2:- Process of Online Netnography

2.4 Map Themes

The ethnographer will now want to know what debates are going to take place in the community or in regard to the phenomena under investigation after collecting and cleaning the data. Using the classic netnographic technique, this would be accomplished by manually reading postings. With hundreds or perhaps millions of postings, this would be time-consuming at best.

However, in the data-driven form, the ethnographer uses unsupervised machine learning to find topics and themes and map them. The ethnographer may achieve this using Decipher Analytics by simply dragging and dropping the necessary text field into the document exploration window. This causes procedures to be triggered that cluster text snippets based on how similar they are, resulting in islands and continents of similar text snippets. The netnographer's goal now is to explore the various portions of this map, read individual postings reflecting on each subject, and analyze the conversations. Decipher Analytics makes it simple to investigate which phrases are overrepresented in each theme, as well as which individual texts

are representative of each theme (with another simple drag-and-drop). This expedites notion exploration and understanding. Themes can also be named, allowing you to measure the size and relationship between them.

2.5 Map Consumer Tribes

The tribe's framework is derived from anthropology and serves as a strong alternative to typical consumer segmentation strategies. A tribe is a group of people who share a set of ideals and reject the values of other tribes. Members of a tribe place significance on specific images, objects, and rituals that are difficult for outsiders to comprehend. In a consumption environment, icons are often influencers and brands; artifacts are physical or virtual items and other objects; and rituals are behaviors that have some common value. The hiking tribe has distinct ideals, iconography, artifacts, and rituals from the beer brewing tribe, which is distinct from the productivity tribe.

Building a comprehensive image of a tribe - its values, iconography, artifacts, rituals, norms, story, conceptions of status, and so on - may be extremely helpful in engaging with and discovering value-added possibilities for various groups of customers. Building a comprehensive image of a tribe - its values, iconography, artifacts, rituals, norms, story, conceptions of status, and so on - may be extremely helpful in engaging with and discovering value-added possibilities for various groups of customers.
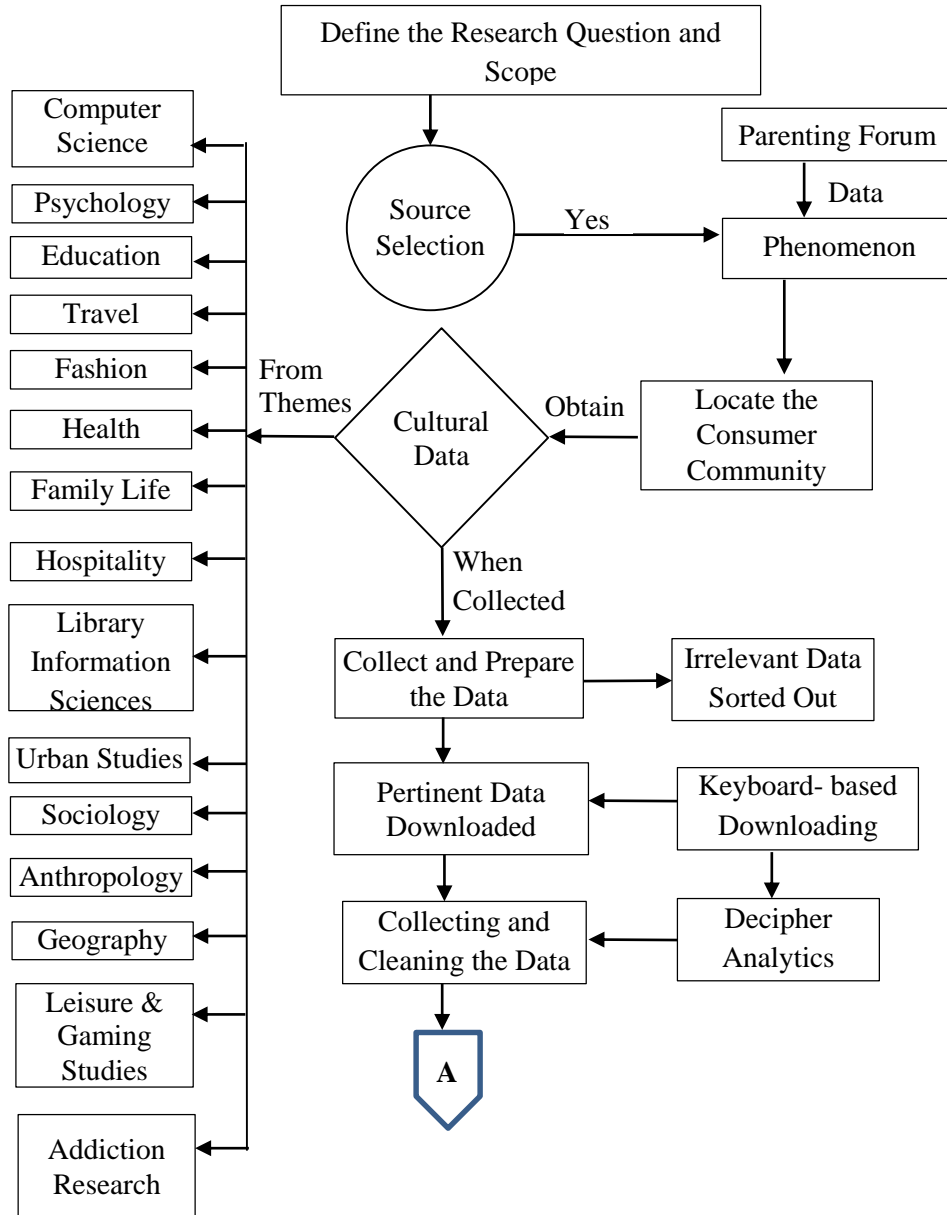
Decipher Analytics provides tools for helping the netnographic researcher accelerate the process of mapping tribes. After having labeled topics, Decipher can cluster these labels so that topics discussed by the same people are located in the same cluster. In this way, each cluster corresponds to a tribe, making it fast to map the discussions of that particular tribe. Dcipher's text enrichment operations, such as entity extraction, can be useful for identifying icons, artifacts, and rituals associated with a tribe.

3. Community and Cultural Netnography

Netnographers place a high value on the fact that people use computer networks to access cultural resources and develop a sense of community. As a result, because this is a brief summary of a larger work or field of knowledge, it must deal with two of the most complex and contentious terms in English: culture and community. This section is dedicated to ensuring that these concepts are fully defined, as well as their application and use in netnography. Despite the term's popularity in describing the sharing of various types of online communications, there has been considerable academic debate about its appropriateness. During the period known as 'Web 1.0,' the online experience was often more akin to reading

a book than engaging in a conversation. Originally, it was assumed that members of online groups almost never met in person. Participants were generally supposed to retain their anonymity in the early beginnings of online communities. Many of the exchanges in which members participated appeared, at first glance, to be brief and generally informative or utilitarian in character. Yet the notion that online gatherings were somehow a form of community was present from the beginning and has persisted. Community and culture can be found in many of the familiar forums and 'places' of the Internet. A forum, a blog or microblog, a wiki, or a site devoted to photo or video enthusiasts, as well as podcasts and vlogs, can all carry culture and serve as a community (video blogs). Social networking platforms and virtual worlds contain intricate cultural indicators that express as well as produce new interactions and groupings. Although newsgroups, bulletin boards, and chat rooms are "old-school" communities, they may never become obsolete. Not only is it socially acceptable for individuals to reach out and connect through this plethora of computer-mediated connectedness, but these 'places' and related activities have also become routine. E-mail, once lauded as the Internet's "killer app," turns out to be only the tip of the communally linked iceberg. The useful term 'virtual community' was developed by Internet pioneer Howard Rheingold (1993), who defined virtual communities as 'social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on . . . public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'. People in online communities, according to Rheingold (1993), exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find and lose friends, play games, flirt, create a little high art, and a lot of idle talk. Hiltz (1984) investigated the issue and created the phrase "online community" over a decade earlier, placing these groups in the sphere of labor rather than pleasure (Hiltz and Turoff 1978). It emphasizes the cultural significance of this information. Netnographic data can take three or more forms because it is participant-observational research: (a) data that the researcher directly copies from online community members' computer-mediated communications; (b) data created through the collection and recording of online community events and interactions; and (c) data that the researcher inscribes. Each of them will be described, and specific recommendations will be made to assist the researcher in acquiring the appropriate type of netnographic data required for certain research projects.

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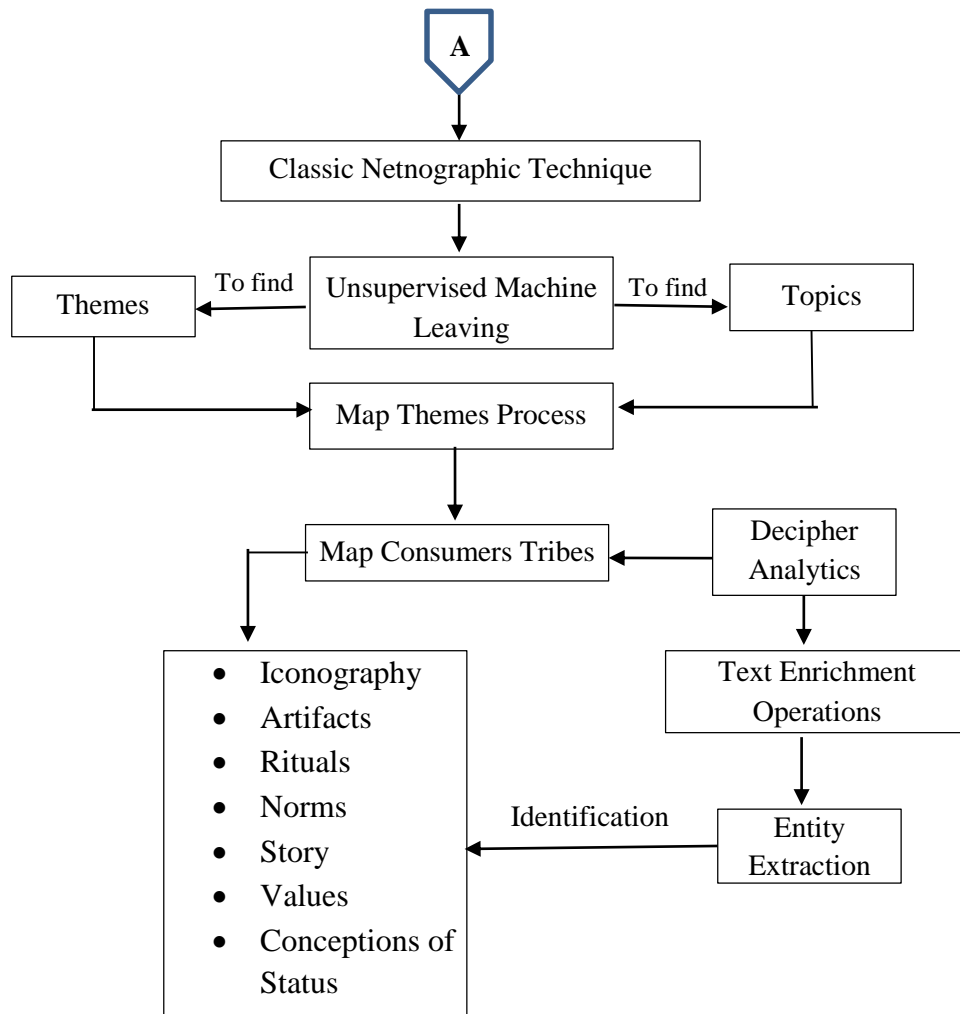
Source: Author's Compilation
Figure 3:- Data-driven Netnography Process

4. Methodological Specificities of Netnography

The expanding number of internet-based studies, together with ongoing advances in computer-mediated communication, provide a new sector for social research while posing several methodological obstacles. The paper focuses on a specific research method known as Netnography (Kozinets 2002, 2010, 2015); Cyber Ethnography (Morton 2001), Ethnography of Virtual Spaces (Burrel 2009), Internet ethnography (Boyd 2008), Ethnography on the Internet (Beaulieu 2004),

Internet-related ethnography (Postill and Pink 2012); Digital Ethnography (Murthy 2008), Webnography (Murthy 2008), (Puri 2007).

Among these alternative labels, we believe that Netnography best captures the nature of this method because it clearly implies the idea of a qualitative research approach that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of the "net," which is the online communities, practises, and cultures formed through computer-mediated communications. While the phrase certainly refers to conventional ethnography, it also implies that doing online ethnographic research is distinct from its offline counterpart. Ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions of communities in their own time and space, as well as in their own everyday lives (Burawoy et al. 1991), with the goal of producing detailed, rich, holistic, and situated accounts and understanding of the cultures, perspectives, and practises of communities. The term "thick description" refers to the practice of paying attention to contextual detail when observing and interpreting social meaning during a qualitative research study.

A detailed description of a social event or action considers not just the immediate behaviors of individuals, but also the contextual and experienced understandings of those behaviors that make the event or action meaningful. Ethnography and Netnography are both naturalistic, unobtrusive ways of researching social behaviors in their everyday contexts (Kozinets 2010). They are both constructed on the mixture of multiple research methodologies, are methodologically flexible and adaptive, and do not limit themselves to following certain processes, but rather stay open to difficulties that arise in the field (Varis 2016).

However, there are several key differences between Netnography and ethnography. Netnography demands a new set of abilities owing to the specificities of computer-mediated communication and its substantially expanded field site accessibility, which necessitates choices about field sites and judgements about the sorts of data to obtain and evaluate. Furthermore, it is significantly less intrusive than conventional ethnography since it allows for researcher invisibility: cyberspace permits researchers to be invisible to those being observed. This enables the documentation of informants' clear language without the risk of obtrusiveness and disruption. This paper presents the methodological specificities of netnography focusing on its context of an application, the definition of the method, and the research design: from the objectives and research questions' setting, to sites' selection and cultural entrée, from the type of data to be collected, to the way to classify, analyze and represent them.

Tasks	High-quality Software–based Computational Tools	Results
Sourcing	Scan the Online Environment	Brands Categories Predict Usage Situations Markets
Tracking	Context to the Data	Relevant and Cultural Insight
Marking	Allows the Researchers to Write and Save their own Notes and Observations	Data Set
Collecting	Archiving and Collection of sets of Data	Cultural Condition
Reducing	Large Amount of the Data Need to be Reduced	Coherent Insights Strong Tools will be Flexible, Subtle, and Adaptable
Visualizing	Different Types of Analysis	Unexpected Insights can occur when Data is Presented in New Visual Ways
Pervading	Easy, User-friendly Interfaces	Real-time Consumer Insights

Source: Author's Compilation

Chart 1:- Task of High-quality Software-based Computational Tools

5. Netnography in Context: Online Social Spaces

The presentation also covers some instances of netnographic investigations in the social sciences before drawing conclusions. Everyday people around the world are using blogs, social networks, chat rooms, personal worldwide pages, and other online channels to express their identity, share information, ideas, and values, and build knowledge, common practises, and relationships (Riffle et al. 2019, Hallett and Barber 2013, Kozinets, 2010, 2002, Garcia et al. 2009, Mann and Stewart 2000). The internet has profoundly entered social life (Beneito-Montagut 2011); the usage of online spaces to form communities and social interactions with individuals regardless of their geographical location is becoming increasingly popular. These virtual places take the shape of small-scale communities that are bound together by common emotions, lifestyles, new moral views, sensations of injustice, and consumer patterns (Cova 1997). Following the definition of Rheingold (1993: 5) - who developed the expression "virtual communities"- they can be referred as social aggregations that emerge from the net when a large number of persons - moved by sufficient human feelings- carry on argumentized

and long discussions about a domain of interest developing webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. They are emotionally oriented, and they may bring together people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds who share common interests, emotions, and sentiments. Members of virtual communities take on the form of communities of practice (Wenger 1998) when they become content producers and practitioners, developing an extensive repertory of resources in order to share information, create ideas, find common solutions, build knowledge, make innovations, and so on (Lave and Wenger 1991). These communities are founded on separate meaning systems that are either solely or primarily exhibited and negotiated online.

People join several virtual communities based on their specific interests. Throughout their lives, the majority of people participate in multiple communities through various media, technologies, and platforms, depending on the passions and interests they perceive to be dominant at the moment. Netnography is a non-media-centric approach to research: the media are not the focus of research, and netnographic research is not interested in media characteristics and use (Pink et al. 2016), but rather in the cultures, experiences, activities, and relationships developed through various media (social networking groups, blogs, communities, and so on), in other words, online "worlds of meanings" (Kozinets 2015). According to this viewpoint, online social spaces can cross boundaries. Consider the scenario of social media, where a group of individuals may collaborate by using the same hashtag to share interests, ideas, feelings, and so on. A technical approach (the usage of the same hashtag) is combined with a discursive strategy in this situation (Caliandro 2018).

Ethnographic approaches for investigating online social interactions, on the other hand, are continually evolving. Even the myriad labels that social researchers use to describe their studies on online communities and cultures are ambiguous. Athens Journal of Social Sciences, 13 January 2020 some researchers (Garcia et al. 2009, Kanayama 2003, Maclaran and Catterall 2002) simply refer to their online studies as "ethnography," meaning a comprehensive and sophisticated approach that does not change much when studying an ethnographic study. Hine (2005) discusses "virtual ethnography," which he regards as a partial and restricted approach since it focuses just on online components of social life and does not take into account the full social experience. Exploring the literature, it is possible to come across many other labels, such as "cyber ethnography" (Robinson and Shulz 2009, Morton 2001), "ethnography of virtual spaces" (Burrel 2009), "Internet ethnography" (Boyd 2008), "ethnography on the Internet" (Nelson and Otnes 2005, Beaulieu 2004), "Internet-related ethnography" (Postill and Pink 2012), "digital ethnography" (Hjorth Many additional researchers (La Rocca et al. 2014, Beaven and Laws 2010) have made similar claims.

6. Findings

An Invaluable Compendium verifies that Netnography has become a generally acknowledged research approach in social science research. It has been used to address a wide range of issues, including culture, identity, social connections, and civic empowerment. Netnography is a qualitative research strategy that applies standard ethnographic approaches to the study of the "net," or the online communities, habits, and cultures generated through computer-mediated interactions.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide an overview or compendium of Netnography as a research method. Netnography is a versatile study approach that may be applied to a wide range of involvement, from lurking to active participation in online discussions and activities. Because netnographic studies are built on creativity and bricolage, each one has distinct and special elements that distinguish it from other studies; as a result, two ethnographies cannot be done in precisely the same way (Kozinets 2010). The methods discussed here are not very new in and of themselves. They make slight adaptations to established research methodologies in order to adapt them to the specificities of modern information and communication technologies. Netnography, as compared to offline qualitative approaches, does not produce fundamental transformations in practice or epistemological content. Netnography, while imitating conventional qualitative research, demonstrates essential changes of features. Netnography research methodologies must be tailored to the peculiarities of online cultural contexts, such as the textuality of data and the disembodied character of online interactions. Furthermore, it necessitates digital and hermeneutic abilities. Researchers must immerse themselves in the society they plan to investigate, get familiar with the dynamics of online interactions, be able to navigate a large amount of unstructured information, evaluate those attaching meaning to it, and find cultural links that bind content together. Online communities and other Internet or ICT cultures are fast becoming an important part of our current social environment. The netnographic approach, a type of ethnographic research tailored to the specific needs of various types of computer-mediated social interaction, may benefit researchers. Using a single concept and a consistent set of criteria for such research will provide stability, consistency, and legitimacy.

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