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Research Article

Ethnographic Research in Digital Age

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Abstract

With online transaction and consumption spaces evolving to become multifaceted, complex, and multimedia spaces, the ethnographic research landscape has changed dramatically. The paper reviews the literatures on online ethnography and identifies the challenges and opportunities to evolve ethnographic approaches. The paper argues that ethnographic research should take advantage of the opportunities offered by Web 3.0 and address the challenges it faces. The paper proposes new directions for future evolution of online ethnographic methods.

Keywords: Ethnography, Netnography, Virtual ethnography, Digital ethnography, Online consumption, Web 3.0.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid migration of technology across geographic and socioeconomic boundaries is a defining element of the times we live in (Masten and Plowman 2003). Especially the Internet “heralds the onset of a third industrial revolution, one based in technological advances in software, hardware and telecommunications” (Smith 2001). These technological advances are changing consumer lives, transforming marketing practices, and opening new avenues for marketing research.

For businesses, one consequence of these changes is the transformation of transactional spaces of the firm. Such transactional spaces-where customers, media, investors, suppliers, distributors and many other external stakeholders have “dealings” with the firm-are transforming rapidly. From arenas for mainly unidirectional firm-to-stakeholder communications-attenuated by a trickle of feedback, the evolving transactional spaces are often arenas for full-blown dialogues (multi-logues, really) where the firm represents only one of several voices.

This paper discussed four alternative ethnographic ways of researching such multivocal conversational spaces surrounding contemporary firms and brands and suggests new directions for selecting the appropriate methods as well as for innovating-in methodological terms.

After this introduction, the paper is organized in four sections. The first section presents-using the Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 terminology-a typology to view the evolution of online transaction and consumption spaces, and to set the stage for discussions of alternative ethnographic methods. This is followed by a review of existing online ethnographic methods from the perspective of fast-transforming online environments. Next, several new directions for online ethnographic methods are proposed. A section with summary and concluding comments wraps up the paper.

Online Transactional and Consumption Spaces: An Evolutionary Typology

Ethnographers are known for immersing themselves in the everyday lives of people and paying attention to the details and context of their daily activities- their life worlds.

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Over the past two decades, consumers' lives have changed dramatically because of the Internet. With the increasingly availability of the Web and rising involvement of consumers in online activities, ethnographers must research the consumer experience in this new context. The evolution of Internet from the past Web 1.0 to the present Web 2.0, and the ongoing shift to the future Web 3.0, shape the online consumption spaces in the sense that these technological developments change the ways in which consumers become aware of, consider, buy, and consume products; the way consumers communicate with marketers; the way they interact with other consumers; and the ways market researchers can access and study consumers. We frame these changes in terms of the three visible "generations" of the web.

Web 1.0

In the era of Web 1.0 (1991-2003), the Internet was characterized by one-way communication. Marketers, as publishers of information, pushed content out to the consumers via websites or e-mail newsletters. The consumer's role was limited only to reading the information presented by the companies. There was not much communication or information flow from consumer to companies or among consumers. During this era, millions of company websites mushroomed with the focus on the introducing the company and product.

Web 2.0

In the era of Web 2.0 (2004-2009), the Internet was shaped by the advent of broadband telecommunications (e.g., DSL, Cable, and Wi-Fi hotspots), social software and media (e.g., social networks such as Facebook), media content sharing via peer-to-peer platforms such as YouTube and YouKu; micro-blogging such as Twitter and ccc; blogging such as Blogspot, WordPress, wikis; iPod and video-on-demand or VOD casts; ubiquitous digital infrastructures (e.g., GPS, bluetooth, RFID), and increasing adoption of smartphones (e.g., popularity of convergent mobile phones with multiple functionalities such as voice, media, GPS, and data). All of these technologies and two-way communication in online public domains comprise the emerging nomadic information environment (Lyytinen and Yoo 2002).

Compared to Web 1.0, Web 2.0 is characterized by:

1. **Change of the role of consumers, from passive to active:** With Web2.0, the consumers are in control. They have a myriad of options and can express their consumption experiences anywhere anytime they want through: blog, video (YouTube), podcasts etc., all quickly and freely. Data is not confined to one site; rather it can be shared, aggregated, and syndicated. Consumers create the content, interact with each other, and control their experience with rich interactive applications.

2. **Online and offline intermix:**

a. **From only PC-based web to ubiquitous access:** The mobile technology, along with social networking made possible by the combination of social software and broadband hardware (wired and wireless), set the stage for ubiquitous computing (e.g., from text data to hypermedia, audio/visual data) and ubiquitous access to social networks – independent of time and location. Such ubiquitous and continuous access is possible not just for marketers and researchers but also for people in general in their multiple life roles as consumers, citizens, friends, workers and more. There are significant transformations in the way life activities are performed (e.g., ability to share – via smartphones – real time travel experiences with family and friends using pictures and video).

b. **From online experience to combination of online and offline experience:** Geo- location (GPS, geo-tagging), augmented reality applications, and social networks help create a bridge between online and offline interactions, changing the way consumers communicate with one another as well as how consumers purchase products and services. For example, the rapid rise of the upstart Foursquare, with its geo-location social networking, was a wakeup call for the "older" upstart Facebook, which quickly introduced the geo-based Facebook Places feature

Marketing researchers have started to recognize that consumers – empowered by Web 2.0 and with fast emergence of even more advanced Web 3.0 – have increasing awareness of social wellbeing because of the ubiquitous connectivity of social networking (e.g., Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan 2010). Contemporary consumers search for companies that conduct the businesses ethnically and meet their deepest needs for social, economic and environmental justice in their mission, vision and values. Coining the term "Marketing 3.0", while a play on the Web 3.0 idea, is indicative of the transformational impact of social media on marketplace and market space transactional and consumption processes. Marketing 3.0 explains the growing imperative for companies to understand that they have a social role to play. Moreover, those companies that recognize there social purpose and deliver recognizable value will benefit by being competitively favored.

Web 3.0

There are many perceptions as to exactly what Web 3.0 era (2010) would entail. Generally, it is estimated that Web 3.0 is the next generation of Internet and evolution of the semantic web; giving consumers, marketers, and researchers a more user focused, personalized, intelligent, and controlled web experience. Key features of Web 3.0 may include more developed mobile applications, socially-adept browsers such as RockMelt, personalized portals and

search engines (e.g., iGoogle) and integrated connections among users (Yahoo 360). Web 3.0 based applications are also expected to include virtual reality locations where consumers can try things without physical travel or presence. An example would be the online virtual world such as today's Second Life, where more than 1 million players, including offline merchants (e.g., Ford) participate. Table 1 shows the summary of such changes.

Such evolving online consumption spaces privilege and highlight certain features of interactions while diminishing or obscuring others. Likewise, these ongoing shifts confound traditional ethnographic methods of capturing and examining the cultural context in which consumption occurs. The ethnographic research landscape has changed dramatically since the inception of Web 2.0. A comprehensive review of the existing online ethnographic methods is, therefore, necessary and desirable at this stage.

Review of Existing Online Ethnographic Methods

Quantitative researchers have used the Internet extensively but ethnography researchers have been slow in adapting to online consumption space, in part due to limitations in the human- to-human connection points offered by Web 1.0. More recently, however, numerous ethnographic approaches for the elaboration of the online life and culture have emerged and developed. Online ethnography refers to a number of related online research methods (e.g., "netnography" developed by Kozinets 1997; "virtual ethnography" from Hine 2000; and "digital ethnography" from Masten and Plowman 2003) that adapt to the study of the communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interactions. Online ethnographic methods have been increasingly used in various social science

disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and marketing and consumer research. Especially, over the past decade, an impressive body of research work in marketing and consumer studies using online ethnographic methods have been published in top level journals and made contributions to the development of marketing discipline (e.g., Kozinets 2002, *Journal of Marketing Research*; Nelson and Otnes 2005, *Journal of Business Research*; Muñiz and Schau 2005, *Journal of Consumer Research*). Online ethnography, however, is under pressure from conflicting opinions concerning its fundamental assumptions (Are the online consumption space, communities, cultures are exotic and fundamentally different than everyday communication?), procedures (How to do fieldwork, observation, data collection?), and appropriate terminology of "online ethnography" (Whether it should be called "netnography", "virtual ethnography", or "digital ethnography"?).

In the sub-sections that follow, we offer brief reviews of four main methods of online ethnography. Of course, these are by no means exhaustive in terms of this methodological domain, but they do represent major alternative approaches.

Virtual Dasein: Existing in Exotic Cyberspace/ cyberculture

"One way of approaching the ethnography of cyberspace is to treat it as virtual Dasein, in which the issue becomes being there in something-like-a-world yet still being in the world."-Varisco (2007).

In his article "Virtual Dasein: Ethnography in Cyberspace," Varisco (2007) recognizes the Internet has become a part of everyday life, but, consistent with early studies (e.g., Levy 2001), he argues that "Cyber culture as an imagined space

Table 1: Evolution of Web and Online Transaction and Consumption Spaces.

Dimension	Web1.0 (1995-2003)	Web2.0 (2004-2009)	Web3.0 (2010-)
Numbers of Users	45 million global users (1996)	Over 1.4 billion global users (2008)	Possibly approaching entire population of the planet
Focus of Relations	One-to-many with focus on companies	Many-to-many with focus on consumer communities	Many-to-many-one place with focus on consumer individuals
Web Content and communication	Owning content and one way communication	Sharing content and two way Communication	The semantic web
Access	Desktop	Laptop and mobile devices	Mobile devices
Data	Text/graphic based	Hypermedia, audio/visual data	Multimedia, audio/visual data
Representative Interface	Websites such as Yahoo!	Facebook, YouTube, Blogspot, flickr, Wikipedia, LinkedIn	iGoogle, Second Life, RockMelt
Role of Consumer	Passive: receiving of message. Passive customers of e-commerce and e-catalog	Active: creating and sharing of message. Customer ratings, reviews, and recommendations. Social responsibility	Active: engaging, connecting, creating, innovating, managing
Marketing Approaches	Marketing 2.0 (consumer based): focus on "messaging" consumers	Transition from Marketing 2.0 to Marketing 3.0 (human centric): focus on the impacts of marketing on stakeholders, socio-cultural change, and environmental sustainability	Marketing 3.0

Source: Authors' adaptations from Social Whisper-Web 1.0 to 3.0 diagram (www.worldpress.com), Kotler et al (2010), and other sources

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Source: Authors' classification based on research reviewed

escapes the philosophical stalemate in the representation of reality problem, because it is obviously a recognizable by-product of technology, and distinctly a super organic mode of relating to the imagined selves of other people." For him, humans, technology and information all are necessary ingredients for understanding culture, unlike the "being in the world" is necessary for human being to exist in this society, interacting online is still a choice to be made: "none is actually born online; death in cyberspace is simply going offline". Thus, he concludes that "except for the demonstrable ways in which interaction on the Internet or in virtual reality games affects human social behaviour, cyber culture only exists as a simulation. Online personalities are merely constructed and inevitably ephemeral". The human being just can act on what they say or hear via web, but what ultimately matters is when human beings do so in the real social world where they are situated in the different social categories. Varisco goes further to note that if human beings become cyborgs in the future, then humans will be more like the machines that enable cyberspace rather than be part of the online culture: "the illusion of material existence".

To Varisco, the online fieldwork that occurs beyond the conventional spatial and temporal ethnographic boundaries fits in the concept of "being here and also being there", or the idea of Virtual Dasein. Researchers need to have some level of technological expertise in computing and information technology (IT) to conduct the fieldwork; with the expertise levels rising as web exploration deepens. The concept of "webservation" (Varisco 2002) is fundamentally different from conventional observation in that "to be blunt, there is no behaviour to 'observe' online and the cyber ethnographer enters the field without leaving the comforts of home".

In recent years the voices challenging the division between the cyberspace and "place" have grown in intensity. Kozinets (2010) argues that "online communities form or manifest cultures, the learned beliefs, values and customs that serve to order, guide and direct the behaviour of a particular society or group". Miller and Slater (2000) suggest that "we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces". If the social construction of what technology is and how it is bounded off from the social, are prior ontological events, then the so-called individual projections about technology must be artifacts of that social construction, not of the subsequently defined element labelled 'technology'.

Netnography

"Method Specifically Designed to Study Cultures and Communities Online."—Kozinets (1997).

Introduced by Kozinets in 1997, netnography designates an interpretative method devised specifically to investigate

the consumer cultures and communities present on the internet. Kozinets suggests that conventional ethnographic fieldwork can be meaningfully applied to computer-mediated interactions. The fieldwork includes direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings (Kozinets 2010). The data collected is mainly textual such as downloaded files of newsgroup postings, transcripts of MUD (multi-user dungeons) or IRC (Internet relay chat) sessions, and e-mail exchanges. As Kozinets (1998) suggests, netnography investigates the specific instance in which community is formed through computer-mediated communications.

Based on conventional ethnographic procedures, Kozinets (2002) recommends the five methodological stages and procedures for netnographic studies that include:

1. Formulation of research questions and identification and gaining entree to appropriate online communities and cultures.
2. Data collection that consists of the researcher's field notes and the artifacts of the culture or community,
3. Data analysis with focus on the cultural contextualizing of online data and classification, coding analysis and contextualization of communicative acts,
4. Ensuring research ethnics by which netnography uses cultural information that is not given specifically to the researchers, and
5. Research representation with focus on member checks to solicit other researchers' opinions.

Virtual Ethnography

"It is the ethnography of, in and through the virtual."—Hine (2000).

Hine (2000) called her study a "virtual ethnography," with the virtual indicating that it is a different kind of ethnography in that it is partial (because the accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities) and inauthentic (because it takes place online).

Virtual ethnography extends the notions of field and ethnographic observation from the exclusive study of co-present and face to face interactions, to a focus on mediated and distributed ones (Hine 2000). Instead of going to particular physical field site, virtual ethnography focuses more on online field connections. Although virtual ethnography is conducted using a predominance of (if not exclusively) online data, proponents of virtual ethnography argue that this does not undermine the quality and depth of the "thick description" generated. Hine (2000) suggests that researchers need to be mobile both virtually and physically

so as to be fully engaged in the ethnography of mediated interaction. In contrast to conventional ethnography that emphasizes long term immersion in the culture being studied, virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement rather than long term immersion (Hine 2000); thus, it allows the researchers to perform a comparative ethnography of more than one site at the same time. Since the early virtual ethnography studies (e.g., ethnography of WolfMOO by Rosenber 1992) were of text based virtual worlds, the data were mostly texts. Boellstorff (2008) notes that there is an emerging set of virtual ethnographies that are graphically based (e.g., Second Life).

Hine does not give prescriptive and exhaustive set of rules on how to do virtual ethnography (Hine 2000). Later, Hair and Clark (2003) identify a procedure for conducting virtual ethnography that includes:

1. Identifying proactive communities, negotiating access,
2. Interacting with participants,
3. Conducting electronic depth interviews,
4. Data interpretation, and
5. Returning results and analysis to the community.

Digital Ethnography

“Using the digital and wireless communication revolutions as platforms for rethinking ethnographic principles, methodologies, and analysis.”-Masten and Plowman (2003).

In 2003, Masten and Plowman characterized digital ethnography as “next wave in understanding the consumer experience,” as “Digital Ethno enables participants to convey the real-time richness of their own lives and environments.” The proponents of digital ethnography argue that with the Web 2.0 increasingly permeating people’s daily lives and people increasingly accessing Web and engaging online communities on the go, the term netnography fails to capture the essence of consumer consumption environment that features ubiquitous digital devices (Iron 2010). In the era of Web 2.0, much of online ethnographic methods including netnography and virtual ethnography are generally text-based techniques transplanted onto the internet; in that

sense, they are not inherently or natively digital (Masten and Plowman 2003). Besides the conventional participant observation and passive observation, digital ethnography focuses on the participant self-reporting. As Masten and Plowman (2003) suggest, putting the power of observation in the participants’ own hands benefits the ethnographic research in two ways. One benefit is that of allowing participants to convey the real-time richness of their own lives and environments. Second, rather than simply acting as the source of data, participants get involved in the research process and share their insights on the topic being studied. Compared with mostly text-based data collected by netnography and virtual ethnography, the details of participants’ experience, in the form of words, images, or audio/video files are collected by digital ethnography. The various types of data enable the researchers to conduct deep and richer analyses (Masten and Plowman 2003).

We compare and contrast the characteristics of these online ethnographic methods in Table 2.

Overview of the Four Approaches

The evolution of online consumption spaces offers the opportunities to advance the online ethnographic methodology in several aspects such as the removal of spatial and temporal boundaries, lower cost of data collection as data is often stored in online repositories, easier access to online communications. The challenges of studying online consumption, however, have not disappeared and may multiply with the transition to Web 3.0 and the rapid globalization-especially via mobile devices of the internet. As discussed above, with the blurring boundaries between the social and the technique, the real and the virtual world, the assumption of “pure- form ethnography” is arguable at best. If the future development of web will ultimately turn human beings into cyborgs, or if technology will create sentient machines, the question arises whether we are observing the real culture of this (human?) society or just our imagination of ‘the other’, who might be a cyborg in front of the screen. With the online and offline life increasingly combining and inter-blending, some online ethnographic methods such as netnography and

Table 2: Comparison of Online Ethnographic Methods.

Dimension	Virtual Dasein	Netnography	Virtual Ethnography	Digital Ethnography
Online and Offline Connection	Cyberculture only exists as a simulation: “the illusion of material existence”.	Community formed through computer- mediated communications	Online world is partial and inauthentic	Consumer life includes both online and offline parts
Fieldwork	No ‘behavior’ to ‘observe’: the idea of ‘behavior’ appearing in web content in false	Direct copy and observations from online community members	Focuses more on online field connections and ‘intermittent immersion’ by researcher	Focus on participant self- reporting
Types of Data	Online data	Online, text based data	Online, text- based and graphic data	Online/offline, multimedia data
Concern about Privacy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

virtual netnography appear to have narrow focus on online interactions about offline lives; and cannot capture the full and rich detail of the Web 3.0 consumer experience. Data collections by netnography and virtual ethnography are limited to text based data, which also is problematic when people are increasingly getting into the graphic based virtual worlds and ubiquitous computing environment of Web 2.0—a trend that Web 3.0 would intensify. Online ethnographic methods have been applied to online communities and culture for over a decade and, along the way, different researchers have used different terms (e.g., netnography, virtual ethnography, digital ethnography, webnography, webservation) to describe their research. As Kozinets (2010) argues that if these terms signal something significantly different, then different terms may be needed; but if all these terms signal same things, then the proliferation of terminology leads to needless confusions.

New Directions for Online Ethnographic Methods

Online ethnographic methods provide frameworks for undertaking ethnographic research in the Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 environments. The Web 2.0 and 3.0 open up new opportunities for the development of online ethnographic methodology. Also, these transitions present new challenges. To further advance the online ethnographic methodology, we propose some new directions of online ethnographic methods in the following sub-sections.

Research Questions and Method Selection

As Sunderland and Denny (2007) contend, “the methodologies employed, whether participant observation, focus groups, in-depth interviews, diaries (online or offline), village censuses, surveys, or maps, “are not ‘ethnographic’ per se, but...are made so by the intellectual framing of the task”. In future studies, it is crucial for researchers to understand the relationship between research question at hand and method and choose the ethnographic or other approaches accordingly (Sunderland and Denny 2003).

Digital Based Online Ethnographic Methodology

With the change from text based data in Web1.0 to multimedia data in era of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0, the ethnographic methods must adapt accordingly. Online ethnographic methodology must change from text based perspective to digital perspective – with whatever sensory and mediated form the digital content takes. With the graphic ability to engage with people via an App on their mobile phone and other digital devices, researchers can do just electronic interviews or online observations. Researchers can ask people to take pictures, record audio, tag a GPS coordinate, and generate rich, though often unwieldy data. By getting participants involved in the process of research, online ethnography can get much more insightful results.

Digital Ethnography as Umbrella Terminology

Though the argument by Kozinets that other online ethnographic methods (e.g., virtual ethnography, digital ethnography, web ethnography) are adoption and adaption of netnography with different names is debatable, having an umbrella terminology for online ethnographic methodology is desirable. As Kozinets points out “it can help an emerging, growing scholarship to have a unifying stance and language also encourage the sharing of knowledge between disparate academic fields.” In this paper, we endorse the point of view offered by Iron (2010) that digital ethnography is the most fitting umbrella terminology, since it captures the essence of the ubiquitous computing environments in the era of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0.

Potential Greater Role of Technology

Future research should look at the impact of technology on the society in a new lens. While recognizing the technological development is essentially part of social domain, its impact might be greater than anticipated. As Varisco (2007) argues that “our becoming cyborgs, by way of metaphor, brings us back the Heidegger’s view that the way we become like the machine we create.”

CONCLUSION

The developments in Web 2.0 and 3.0 have raised important questions for conducting and developing online ethnographic methodologies. Attention has traditionally focused on the new context of online environments. This paper examines the existing online ethnographic methodologies along with the evolution of the online consumption space over decades. These methodologies present different merits and limitations. We suggest that future online ethnography should take new directions: choosing methodology based on the research question at hand, collecting various formats of (multimedia) data to generate richer content – with greater involvement of those studied, having a unifying umbrella terminology of “digital ethnography” to standardize the stance and language of the interested disciplines, and further researching the possible impact of technology on consumer culture.

With the advent of Web 3.0 which features the semantic web, we believe online ethnographic methodology would develop further and faster, and in multiple and multivocal ways, to describe the online consumption cultures that have been emerging.

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