

Copyright © 2022 by Cherkas Global University



Published in the USA  
International Journal of Media and Information Literacy  
Issued since 2005  
E-ISSN 2500-106X  
2022. 7(2): 572-577

DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2022.2.572  
<https://ijmil.cherkasgu.press>



## Netnography in Social Networking Sites – An Exploration of Cybercultures in Consumer Groups

Sonali Srivastav <sup>a</sup>, Shikha Rai <sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>National Institute of Fashion Technology, Panchkula, Haryana, India

<sup>b</sup>Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India

### Abstract

Social networking sites (SNS's) allow for formation of groups of individuals united by a cause, interest and at times even a brand. These groups could have a hundred or a billion members, ranging in their degrees of involvement. With such huge numbers, quantitative studies such as surveys, or highly selective qualitative studies such as interviews remain only popular options to study audience behaviour. This paper explores the method of Netnography (Kozinets, 1998) for observing the online populations and evaluates its pros and cons for studying cybercultures in the Social Networking Sites. Netnography is an online adaptation of on-field ethnographic study, a method utilized often in sociological studies. It allows for a qualitative as well as a quantitative approach with the use of various methods and tools adapted for a computer mediated field. This paper explores the various approaches and tools of Netnography, their uses and perceptible outcomes and compares it with those of other methods of studying virtual populations. With a review of select studies and research papers on Digital communication research methodologies and virtual sociological paradigms, the study evaluates the pros and cons of adopting this research method. Lastly, the paper also discusses the ethical repercussions of online observation vis-a-vis cyber stalking.

**Keywords:** netnography, virtual population, social networking sites (SNSs), cyber stalking, virtual platforms, media.

### 1. Introduction

Internet has become a platform for inception, as well as congregation of various communities. Virtual populations from all over the world cohabit the internet and have found ways to group on different bases, similar to the populations inhabiting the real world. Communities formulating online are digitally aided social networks that cross geographical and political boundaries in favour of mutual interests. Like communities in real world, these are also bounded by certain codes and rituals (Carey, 2008). These communities can be divided into two categories, those which formulate online and those which exist offline but utilize web platforms to connect online. Mostly these communities operate online, with few cases where individuals choose to meet offline, or yearly congregations such as Comic con etc. In online platforms, these communities interact virtually with help of text(chats, message boxes, bulletin boards, emails), visuals(photos, memes, graphics, videos) and audio(podcasts, audio messages) etc. The messages exchanged are archived in servers and when extracted and collated they work as data or content to be studied extensively, shedding light on the community behaviour (Fisher, 2019).

\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [sonali.srivastav@nift.ac.in](mailto:sonali.srivastav@nift.ac.in) (S. Srivastav), [shikharai@ignou.ac.in](mailto:shikharai@ignou.ac.in) (S. Rai)

These online communities can be further broadly categorized in two categories: open communities and closed communities. Open communities are such as Wikipedia, which do not require the user to register, thus opening the community and the content generated to anyone and everyone. Closed communities are the ones that are selective about the participants, filtering applicants on basis of several factors, ranging from sex to whether they are a fan of a music band, as per the needs of the group. These communities are difficult to study as they guard their membership and thus the content as well. So while the community exists in public sphere on the web, the interactions and thus the content is hidden from the non-members (Kim et al., 2020)

Thus, in case of researching on the former category of communities, the researcher has complete access to data, and is able to employ any number of qualitative and quantitative tests on the same. But in the case of latter, the only way to gather the data is that researcher becomes a participant of the community. The participant can be a passive observer or an active participant, depending on the method and skill of the researcher. It is their interaction with the group and observation of the practices, rituals and content from the inside, which elicit rich data which can be generalized and abstracted to describe the community, much like an ethnographic study.

Ethnography as a classical research method requires the researcher to live with the community, observe their practices including their patterns of communication within the community and with the outside world. The content produced while communicating, such as verbal and non-verbal conversations, rituals, etc are gathered in form of data through field notes. The data is then analysed and interpreted with a larger world view (Brewer, 2000). Netnography is a virtual adaptation of the same with the researcher joining the virtual communities, observing the communication patterns of the community population with each other. They also analyse the virtual content produced by the community and the reactions to the same within and across communities. Much like real world, these online communities also have their own practices and customs and researchers are also able to identify them for the community in the virtual world (Kozinets, 2015).

Netnography has also been named alternatively as Cyber Ethnography (Morton, 2001), Ethnography of virtual spaces (Burrell, 2009), Internet Ethnography (Boyd, 2008), Digital Ethnography (Murthy, 2008) and Webnography (Puri, 2007). While most of them pander upon the same methods, approaches and tools, it is Netnography that has been most extensively written about by Kozinets, including case studies from various socio and psychological perspectives including marketing and communication.

This research is aimed at analysing Netnography as a method for researching online communities and evaluating its tools and techniques.

## 2. Materials and methods

**Aim:** The overarching aim of this study is to assess the methods of Netnography for studying online populations.

**Objectives:** The specific objectives of this paper are

1. To explore the approaches and tools of Netnography
2. To estimate the perceptible outcomes by adopting various tools of Netnography
3. To compare Netnography with other methods of studying virtual populations
4. To analyse ethical repercussions of adopting Netnography to study audience/consumer behaviour.

**Method:** Adopting an evaluatory approach, the study employs an in-depth review of select studies and essays written on various methods of researching online populations

**Sample:** Two types of papers were chosen for the research

1. Studies which were critiquing the methods and tools
2. Studies which were employing the methods and tools

The filtration process was done on the basis of relevance of the paper for this particular study.

## 3. Discussion

Ethnography is the study of human interactions occurring in public space, elucidating on their behaviours, perceptions bound by a geographical space and time. This helps in understanding the drawing thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973). Drawing parallels with the real world ethnographic study, Netnography requires the researchers to join online communities and study the communication styles,

patterns and nature of engagement, their tangible outcomes, adapted practices, and lastly adaptation of the Ritual Model (Carey, 2008) in them for the course of the study.

It is emerging as a suitable method for studying audience behaviour as in the era of social media, as a number of platforms are available on the web to facilitate engagement with the masses (Addeo et al., 2019). These social networks facilitate discussion and posting of own beliefs without any censorship or hegemonical structures, thus helping communities prosper. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Groups on Facebook etc. remain guarded for the outside world, but Twitter, YouTube and Instagram provide a top down approach (Kozinets, 2019).

Secondly, these official social media groups are not only used by the audience, but by content producers, collaborators and other stake holders as well, thus facilitating a transparent public discussion. Emerging as a popular method of marketing research that focusses especially on consumer groups as communities, Netnography has been adapted to study entertainment industries (Rai, Srivastav, 2021), tourism industry (Tavakoli, Wijesinghe, 2019), fashion industry (Kapoulas et al., 2020) amongst many others.

According to Alexa, SNS are the most popular web pages, inviting large numbers of users every day. These websites are free to join, thus economic parity is not a concern to be a part of them. They also allow sharing of videos, liking and commenting on them, and subscribing/following a particular channel as well, thus resulting in rich data that can be extensively analysed, qualitatively as well as quantitatively (Gugushvili et al., 2020).

As the number of virtual populations keeps rising, so does the variety of communities and participation in them as well. A variety of social media platforms like Facebook facilitate formation of virtual groups which function as the public sphere for the audience. These groups have made it possible to study audience behaviour and interaction with the text, creators and each other at the same time (Jerolmack et al., 2021). These groups also narrow down the sample size of the population relevantly as they are specifically dedicated to the subject in context (Salmons, 2021) (Gambetti, Kozinets, 2020).

Lastly, today all companies and conglomerates ensure their presence on social media to reach out to their audience. Apart from having their websites and email address, social media presence is also required in today's times. Usually these companies have their own official pages/groups on the social networking platforms which are used for company – customer communication (Gonçalves et al., 2020). This communication can be one way in case of announcements or platforms which allow limited interaction or two way in case of social media where customers can engage with the content posted online. These official platforms not only give credibility to the content shared by the company directly, it also helps in reflecting on the success or failure of the target audience engagement strategies adopted (Rai, Srivastav, 2021).

#### 4. Results

There are two types of approaches to studying online populations: 'Covert Netnographic approach' and 'Overt Netnographic approach' (Aker et al., 2017). Covert approach employs methods which do not let the group participants know that they are being observed. While this allows for unfiltered observation and rich data, there might be less access provided by the group admins limiting the field. Secondly, cyber stalking or lurking gives rise to many discussions on ethical issues as well. On the other hand, Overt approach involves the researcher reaching out to the community and asking for their consent to be observed. This usually involves communicating with the opinion leaders of that particular community. While it is easy to find someone in groups that are administered by a person or a small group of people, but these roles are different from a leader's role in the community. Having sought consent, even with the Overt approach, Netnography provides invisibility greater than offline methods, as Internet allows for anonymity. Thus it still emerges as a far less intrusive method compared to any other methods of gathering the data (Heinonen, Medberg, 2018).

Having established themselves as a part of the group, covert or overt, the researcher now may employ a variety or combination of methods to gather the data. This usually begins with the Observation method. It may involve observing and studying:

- The type of content(text, visuals, audio) which is being shared across the community usually in form of posts.
- The amount and type of reactions of the community on content posting.
- The nature of conversations online emanating from the content.

The researcher may also get involved and converse with the participants to observe their reactions. The process of data gathering is as follows:

- Coding: The researchers identifies and allocates codes for specific communication symbols. This makes data gathering simple and categorized.

- Noting: Data is now noted down in various formats, mostly digital in case of Netnography.

- Comparing: The researcher now needs to compare between different data sets in order to correlate and corroborate.

- Generalizing: After drawing out conclusions from the data, the researcher try to ascertain its wider applicability within the community. Moving further, they could compare it with other communities as well.

- Theorizing – After validating the data for the community practices, the researcher may develop a theoretical framework specific for the community basing on its characteristics ([Gambetti, Kozinets, 2020](#)).

While the process seems very much like Content analysis, this one is more transient and flexible as data is dynamic and could be in multiple formats. Data from the observation study can be collected in two parts: Archival and Field notes. Field Notes are those which are made by the researcher on a daily basis while applying the participatory observation method. Multiple windows can also be opened on the same screen to allow for simultaneous observation and note taking in an excel or a typing program. This eases the process furthermore and makes the act of observing covert, digital and real time. This method also helps in noting observations faster, simpler and easier to archive and edit later ([Ahuja et al., 2018](#)).

Archival data is collected by studying the posts, their purpose, their content and the audience engagement with them to draw out patterns of engagement after a period of time. In general, social media posts need at least two weeks' time to accumulate reactions ([Kozinets et al., 2018](#)). A post should be studied real time, for a stipulated duration. Many a times, researchers resort to saving the links at times but the host of the website may edit the data or remove the page completely. In that case, screenshots/screengrabs or screen recording can be done to capture and store the photographic evidence of the data, while observing the group communication. These evidences can be later used to elaborate and validate the data gathered.

Following factors can be regularly monitored for eliciting data on social media groups:

- a) Increase in number of likes, followers and shares following any activity.
- b) The comments – frequency, tone, frequently used words, emoticons, memes.
- c) Links from the page, leading to another page – by the page admins and the audience.
- d) Frequency of posting and other engagement strategies adopted by the group members.
- e) Popular memes/Graphics/Videos/other content ([Bartl et al., 2016](#)).

The content and conversation may be further analysed using the content analysis method, qualitative as well as quantitative. Interviews can be conducted over chat services, mails or thread conversations with willing participants. Focus group discussions can also help in gathering the group perspectives. Moving over, social network analysis may help in identifying the reach and impact of the community and further data scraping can help in observing the undercurrents of rising trends within the populations ([Bandarchi et al., 2019](#)).

To employ these methods in the virtual world, the researcher needs to have a skill set adapted for the same. As the communities are dynamic and not bound by personal presence the researchers need to be flexible and spontaneous, depending on the circumstances. They also need to be comfortable with their technological skills as the data gathering, storing, analysing and archiving needs to be done all with digital software and tools ([Duffy, Reid, 2018](#)).

With a mix of methods that can be employed, Netnography is replacing other methods of studying the populations online. So far the most popular methods of studying the populations have been survey, interviews and focus group discussions. Surveys are conducted to cover large populations and can collect quantitative data with ease and precision with the help of well-designed questionnaires. They require the researchers to approach the population and administer a set of questions on them. This basically means that the target groups and samples should be identifiable and approachable in physical space. In lieu of this, surveys have few drawbacks which are also the obvious strengths of Netnography, especially when it comes to studying the audience behaviour online:

- a) No physical area can be identified to meet the sample as online communities are not bound by geographical space
- b) Response rates of online surveys are dismally low (5-10 %)

c) Self-reporting by the respondents allows for biases to obscure the data (Gideon, 2012).

Another method eliciting qualitative data is interviews. With highly specific sampling and amount of time spent with each sample, interviews are a personal method of data collection. With the number of sample universe increasing, sampling for interviews becomes extremely difficult, a case relevant to online populations as their numbers range in lakhs and crores. It is also not possible to train a team of interviewers to administer the interview schedule due to the barrier of virtual space and low response ratio of online interactions. Still, the researchers may opt for triangulation with interviews with experts/opinion leaders being one of the methods (Gonçalves et al., 2020).

Secondly, interviews also allow the researcher to gather data from other inputs as well, such as body language, environment and other non-verbal cues. Thirdly, it is the interpersonal interviewing skills that help in gathering rich data. In an online scenario, firstly the sampling becomes difficult, secondly the non-verbal cues are missing and lastly the interviewer might face the barrier of technology while trying to establish a rapport with the interviewee, thus compromising the quality of data. These factors reduce the potential of interviews as a data gathering method in online spaces (Jerolmack et al., 2021).

Lastly Focus Group Discussions are also not very popular online as it becomes very difficult to elicit discussion in online groups. Some participants are more responsive than others, much like offline scenarios, but the external inputs such as body language, non-verbal cues, gestures etc are not recorded (Villegas, 2018).

British Educational Research Association highlights that while conducting a netnographic research, one needs to keep the 'privacy, autonomy, diversity, values and dignity' of the participants in mind. A post on social media may not have been made while considering its potential impact on research. Thus the intent for posting is always different from creating data for research. Secondly, social media platforms blur the line between public and private data. While the platforms allow for visibility and privacy options, it is not possible to figure out how many of the users are aware of these customizing options and are using them to effect (BERA, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

The overarching aim of this study was to explore Netnography as a research method for studying online populations and it emerges as a convenient, accurate, in depth and a novel medium for studying the online populations. It can be an amalgam and apply a combination of methods to extract the data from a variety of platforms. Traditional methods such as participant observation and field notes for example, allow for a penetrating qualitative approach. On the other hand, data extraction software and social network mapping gather quantitative data for analysis. Netnography can also be utilized to study immersive technologies such as Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality (Kozinets, 2022). Ranging from choice of platform to choice of tool, Netnography requires a skill set adept for digital interfaces. Being a new method, it is evolving along with the world it studies, the Internet.

## References

- Addeo et al., 2019 – Addeo, F., Bolcato, M.Y., Esposito, M., Paoli, A.D. (2019). Doing social research on online communities: The benefits of netnography. *Athens journal of social sciences*. 7(1): 9-38.
- Ahuja et al., 2018 – Ahuja, V., Alavi, S., Sharma, R. (2018). The future scope of netnography and social network analysis in the field of marketing. *Journal of internet commerce*. 17(1): 26-45.
- Akter et al., 2019 – Akter, S., D'Ambra, J., Wilson, C.S. (2019). Affordance theory and e-books: evaluating the e-reading experience using netnography. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*. 23(5): 873-892.
- Bandarchi et al., 2019 – Bandarchi, M., Farashiani, A., Haddad, S., Nazari, N., Rajabion, L. (2019). Knowledge sharing mechanisms in virtual communities: A review of the current literature and recommendations for future research. *Human Systems Management*. 38(4): 365-384.
- Bartl et al., 2016 – Bartl, M., Kannan, V.K., Stockinger, H. (2016). A review and analysis of literature on netnography research. *International Journal of Technology Marketing*. 11(2): 165-196.
- BERA, 2018 – British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018). Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (4th ed.). [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethicalguidelines-for-educational-research-2018>
- Boyd, 2008 – Boyd, D.M. (2008). Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics. University of California, Berkeley.

- [Brewer, 2000](#) – *Brewer, J.* (2000). *Ethnography*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- [Burrell, 2009](#) – *Burrell, J.* (2009). The field site as a network: A strategy for locating ethnographic research. *Field methods*. 21(2): 181-199.
- [Carey, 2008](#) – *Carey, J. W.* (2008). *Communication as culture, revised edition: Essays on media and society*. Routledge.
- [Duffy, Reid, 2018](#) – *Duffy, K., Reid, E.* (2018). A netnographic sensibility: Developing the netnographic/social listening boundaries. *Journal of Marketing Management*. 34(3-4): 263-286.
- [Fisher, 2019](#) – *Fisher, G.* (2019). Online communities and firm advantages. *Academy of Management Review*. 44(2): 279-298.
- [Gambetti, Kozinets, 2020](#) – *Gambetti, R., Kozinets, R.V.* (eds.). (2020). *Netnography unlimited: Understanding technoculture using qualitative social media research*. Routledge.
- [Geertz, 1973](#) – *Geertz, C.* (1973). *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*.
- [Gideon, 2012](#) – *Gideon, L.* (ed.). (2012). *Handbook of survey methodology for the social sciences*. New York: Springer.
- [Gonçalves et al., 2020](#) – *Gonçalves, C.A., Morais, G.M., Santos, V.F.* (2020). Netnography: Origins, foundations, evolution and axiological and methodological developments and trends. *The Qualitative Report*. 25(2): 441-455.
- [Gugushvili et al., 2020](#) – *Gugushvili, N., Kross, E., Massar, K., Täht, K., Verduyn, P.* (2020). Social comparison on social networking sites. *Current opinion in psychology*. 36: 32-37.
- [Heinonen, Medberg, 2018](#) – *Heinonen, K., Medberg, G.* (2018). Netnography as a tool for understanding customers: implications for service research and practice. *Journal of Services Marketing*. 32(6).
- [Jerolmack et al., 2021](#) – *Jerolmack, C., Murphy, A. K., Smith, D.* (2021). Ethnography, data transparency, and the information age. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 47: 41-61.
- [Kapoulas et al., 2020](#) – *Kapoulas, A., Miaoulis Jr, G., Xharavina, N.* (2020). Netnography as a marketing research tool in the fashion industry in Southeast Europe. *International Journal of Market Research*. 62(4): 499-515.
- [Kim et al., 2020](#) – *Kim, J.W., Lee, H.J., Park, H.J., Park, S.J.* (2020). Anonymous participation and collaboration efficiency in online communities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Information Systems*. 30(3): 497-512.
- [Kozinets et al., 2018](#) – *Kozinets, R.V., Parmentier, M.A., Scaraboto, D.* (2018). Evolving netnography: How brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-than-human netnography can transform your research. *Journal of Marketing Management*. 34(3-4): 231-242.
- [Kozinets, 1998](#) – *Kozinets, R.V.* (1998). On Netnography: Initial reflections on consumer research investigations of cyberculture. *Advances in Consumer Research*. 25(1).
- [Kozinets, 2015](#) – *Kozinets, R.V.* (2015). *Netnography: redefined*. Sage.
- [Kozinets, 2019](#) – *Kozinets, R.V.* (2019). *Netnography: The essential guide to qualitative social media research*. Sage.
- [Kozinets, 2022](#) – *Kozinets, R.V.* (2022). Immersive netnography: a novel method for service experience research in virtual reality, augmented reality and metaverse contexts. *Journal of Service Management*.
- [Morton, 2001](#) – *Morton, H.* (2001). Computer-mediated communication in Australian anthropology and sociology. *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*. 45(1): 3-11.
- [Murthy, 2008](#) – *Murthy, D.* (2008). Digital ethnography: An examination of the use of new technologies for social research. *Sociology*. 42(5): 837-855.
- [Puri, 2007](#) – *Puri, A.* (2007). The web of insights: The art and practice of webnography. *International journal of market research*. 49(3): 387-408.
- [Rai, Srivastav, 2021](#) – *Rai, S., Srivastav, S.* (2021). Virtual Communities as Sites of Market Genesis: A Netnographic Study of Netflix India and Amazon Prime Video India's Facebook Groups. *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy*. 6(2): 436-446. DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2021.2.436
- [Salmons, 2021](#) – *Salmons, J.E.* (2021). *Doing qualitative research online*. Sage.
- [Tavakoli, Wijesinghe, 2019](#) – *Tavakoli, R., Wijesinghe, S.N.* (2019). The evolution of the web and netnography in tourism: A systematic review. *Tourism Management Perspectives*. 29: 48-55.
- [Villegas, 2018](#) – *Villegas, D.* (2018). From the self to the screen: A journey guide for auto-netnography in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Management*. 34(3-4): 243-262.