3E

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NETNOGRAPHY

The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research

5 Praxis: Introducing Practices and Data Operations

Chapter Overview

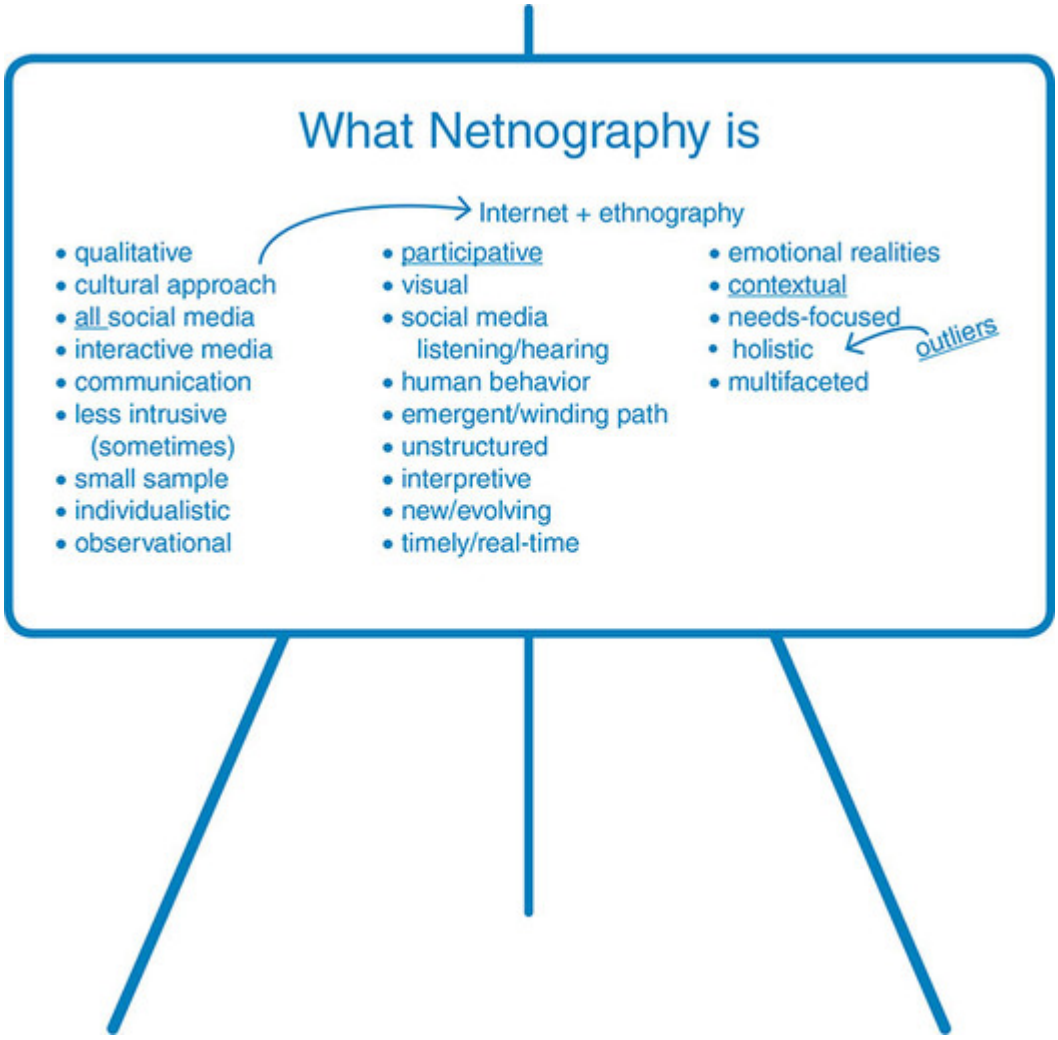
The purpose of this chapter is to initiate your understanding of netnographic praxis, the operational protocols of netnography, while also beginning your research project. We will start with a methodological overview that introduces the four elements distinguishing netnography from every other research method. These four elements are cultural focus, social media data, engagement, and netnographic praxis. The chapter will then go on to present the six movements of netnography: initiation, investigation, interaction, immersion, integration, and incarnation. These six movements each contain a range of operations within them, and transpire over four general, discrete, and sequential stages: research focus, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and research presentation. With this initial overview in place, the chapter will move into a discussion of the first stage of the netnographic research process, initiation. The initiation stage focuses the research with a netnographic research question. This section will teach you about the two major parts to a research question, the research topic and the angle of inquiry. Then, the chapter will explore how research questions are initiated through focusing either on an existing conceptual relationship or one that examines an empirical phenomenon. We will discover that both of these initiators are intertwined in the act of doing netnography. Through a series of exercises, the reader will then learn how concept and phenomenon are dynamically interrelated in netnographic research questions – and also about the meet-in-the-middle process. Finally, the chapter will examine and analyze a range of research questions that have been used in netnographic research, providing clear guidelines and a strong foundation for readers to move forward with their own netnographic project.

What Netnography Is

It might be worthwhile at this early point in your learning of netnography to stop and take stock. The first four chapters have been loaded with information about digital and media anthropology, social media, its history, sociality, intersectionality, technogenesis, and many other things. You might try to synthesize some of this knowledge now by asking yourself a basic, clarifying question: what is netnography? Without looking back at any of the material you have read in this book so far, and without looking ahead to the next few pages, simply relying on what you know so far, type or write some of the main words or phrases (I guess you could use emojis too) that come into your head when you think about netnography. Netnography is ... (you fill in the blanks).

In my 2017 netnography course at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, I asked my MBA students to describe what netnography is, and I wrote their answers on the board. After we had exhausted most of the answers, the board looked something like Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 What Netnography Is… (adapted from a classroom blackboard exercise)



In about fifteen minutes, my students were able to derive a powerful and fairly exhaustive set of descriptors of the netnographic approach. Using my phone, I took a photograph of the whiteboard and shared it on Twitter with a #netnography hashtag. Although it is a long and informative listing, it might be a bit overwhelming. It could be inevitable that, as soon as we begin to learn about a complex approach like netnography, we begin to see connections and linkages with other areas and concepts. We begin to see contradictions and complexities. But if our purpose is to guide and clarify, perceiving those connections and complications too early on in the process can be more confusing than helpful. This chapter's purpose, then, is to simplify. And so, to begin, I will provide a few short guidelines to clear the way and enable you to start doing your

own netnography. By the end of the chapter, you will not only understand what makes a netnography research project different from other projects, you will also experience how those guidelines have led you to a research question that will help guide your netnographic project.

Four Elements that Distinguish Netnography

What are the defining elements of netnography? Which particular elements separate this approach from all other ways of understanding the world? If we understand the elements that differentiate netnography, we should be able to combine netnography more effectively with other approaches, gaining in the process a more multidimensional understanding of its underlying procedures. The four distinct elements that differentiate netnography from every other investigative path are: (1) its cultural focus, (2) its use of social media data, (3) its requirement of appropriate engagement, and (4) its specification of particular procedures as a nexus of netnographic praxis. In this section, we discuss each of these briefly in turn.

Element 1: Cultural Focus

The first of netnography's four defining elements is its 'cultural focus'. Netnography is a form of ethnography. Like ethnography, it focuses on an understanding of a focal phenomenon, site, topic, or people that is attuned to difference, complexity, context, and meaning. As with anthropological studies, a netnography values an empathic sense of verstehen, it seeks explanation in cultural causality, and its perspective seeks to unite individual local beliefs and practices with wider, shared, let-us-call-them networks of knowledge, information, and institutionalized influence. If culture is socially patterned human thought and action, netnography seeks these meanings within the realms of social media, whether through:

1. the use of new language and symbols, such as novel words, acronyms, memes, fonts, or emojis, which may be created exclusively for online use, or reflected online, or
2. the expression of various online rituals, such as posting particular types of video, image, or avatar; some of these will be

practices that are only possible online, or are enabled by various facets of online experience such as anonymity or partial anonymity; or
3. the adoption of new identities, expressed through role modeling and play acting, adopting new fashions, attempting new social positions (such as influencer, or activist), sometimes through aggression, and often in a dynamic manner, as if trying on new identities were a stylistic matter; or
4. the telling of stories, sharing of beliefs, passing along of powerful images and media; social media is filled with narratives whose importance requires deep analysis, identification, and (re)connection of meaning; and
5. the inculcations and reinforcement of value and value systems through the feedback reward structures of social media sharing, commenting, and liking; which is also tied into
6. relations of power, group dynamics, exclusion and inclusion, submission and domination, and hierarchies that express themselves online.

As Chapter 1 explained, these cultural elements link netnography not only with the epistemologies and other philosophical bases of established qualitative research methods, but also with newer variants such as digital anthropology, virtual ethnography, and most renditions of online ethnography.

Element 2: Social Media Data

The second element, ‘social media data’, distinguishes netnography from traditional ethnography. Netnographies focus primarily on social media communications. Again, social media are applications, websites, and other online technologies that enable users to easily engage in creation, distribution, commenting, and connecting activities. Research on social media use in 2018 by the Pew Research Center listed the following social media sites as the most popular ones: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Social media are created and

accessed from a variety of different devices, from wearables like watches and glasses to tablets, omnipresent smart phones, stalwart old laptops, and desktops. In netnography, we often seek out data that seems to be created by regular, ordinary, people – as much as we can interpret who they are. The data collected in netnography can also originate in media outlets such as online news media, corporate blogs, and professional reviews. Increasingly, there is no hard line between amateur and semi-professional content creation, which creates new opportunities and challenges for netnography. Ordinary posts can go viral, attaining an impressive influence. Authentic amateurs become professionalized at a rapid pace, as oceans of money flood into social media and turn everyday conversations into advertising and public relations opportunities. The entire communication ecosystem is grist for the netnographic mill.

Element 3: Immersive Engagement

The third distinguishing element is something I term ‘immersive engagement’. A key factor in netnography that I have emphasized from its inception is a reflective type of personal involvement in the focal phenomenon by the members of the research team or the individual researcher. This is the part of netnography that often creates the most confusion, and rightly so, because the word ‘participation’ has been used frequently to refer to this aspect. However, the word ‘participation’, like the words ‘community’ and ‘culture’, is both loaded and imprecise – especially when considered within the novel social media contexts in which netnography operates. Participation sounds like action to some people, and that suggests to people that posting messages is necessary. And because posting messages in every social media site you study invites a range of ethical and practical problems, people are perplexed. That confusion is why I think it is necessary and propitious to define a particular kind of engagement: immersive engagement.

In an in-the-flesh traditional ethnography, cultural participation is rather clear. I conducted field research at the Burning Man Project by repeatedly attending the organization's annual event in Black Rock City, Nevada, getting to know the people there, taking part in various theme camp activities, and generally learning about the local on-the-ground culture and acting the way that other participants do – except that my learning and actions transpired in a reflective manner that always also included my work's research objectives, resulted in me recording most of my conversations and many of my acts, and required me to write fieldnotes for one to two hours every day. My ethnographic participation with the Burning Man Project was a physical, social, and emotional engagement with the place and the people, and it happened at particular times and in specific locations. But one of the keys to my immersion was not simply that I was presently there, it was that I was learning about the place and its people by being an active, reflective learner – and that active learning and reflection was captured in my fieldnotes.

Consider the contrast with a hypothetical Burning Man netnography. If I was to have exclusively studied conversations and topics related to Burning Man that occur online, on the public-facing Burning Man website forums, on Instagram, Reddit, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, then my attendance at the event would not be important. The idea of participation could be transferred to a range of online sites devoted to Burning Man. What if I never attended Burning Man, never posted a single message or comment, but read and pondered the postings of event participants every day for the month prior, during, and for one month after the physical event? Would you have to consider my intellectual, cultural, and emotional engagement with the event and in particular its online manifestations to be strong? The 'field' of my involvement would change. And my ongoing, daily, immersive engagement would need to be captured somehow. That somehow is in reflective notes, what I will in this book term entries into an immersion journal (see Chapter 10 for details).

From the contrast between the examples, we can quickly see that involvement in the much more dispersed and loosely structured communications that typify social media are not exactly commensurate with traditional participant-observation. In particular, netnographic engagement does not necessarily need to involve discussion with other people, although it often does. It does not need to involve posting messages. It does not require interviews. However, it cannot also be limited to the 'download and code' of content analysis, either. Data collection and its later analysis must reflect and capture an active intellectual and emotional engagement with online sites.

Netnography thus requires a structured and disciplined approach to immersive engagement in qualitative social media research. Engagement means keeping a special type of netnographic fieldnotes in an immersion journal. Immersive engagement is a major and important topic in this Essential Guide, and we examine the topic in finer detail in an entire subsection of Chapter 10. The next section of this chapter examines netnographic praxis in finer detail.

Element 4: Netnographic Praxis

The fourth and final distinguishing element is something I term 'netnographic praxis'. With this version of the text, netnography gains an unprecedented level of operational precision, accompanied by entirely new terminology. With that precision and new terminology come a clear differentiation from other methods. A given piece of research is a netnography if it utilizes recognized and recommended netnographic research practices, and also discursively demonstrates an awareness of netnographic conventions, terminology, history, methodological perspectives, and other relevant scholarly works that might impact upon its procedures and research topic. These conventional, historical, methodological, and procedural elements are netnographic praxis, and they include elements discussed throughout this book such as following specific ethical procedures, collecting data using a netnographic research webpage, creating and

using an immersion journal, using integrative analysis and interpretive techniques, and so on.

As you will read and learn in the remainder of this book, netnography replaces a range of traditional ethnographic concepts and terms with new ones more suited to the data environment and the research task at hand, that is, using social media data to develop deep cultural understanding. Table 5.1 summarizes some of these changing terms for this, the newest, most elaborate, and most up-to-date version of netnography.

Table 5.1

Table 5.1 Changing Terms for Netnography

Traditional Ethnographic Term and Concept	Netnographic Term and Concept
Ethnography	Netnography
Field or Field site	Data site
Fieldnotes	Immersion Journal
Participation	Engagement
Observation	Data Operations
Participant-Observation (or Observer)	Engaged Data Operations (or Operator), abbreviated as EDO
Interpretation	Integration

Focus, Data, Engagement, Praxis: The Four Elements

These four elements distinguish netnography from all other methods of understanding and provide a methodological basis for any netnographic project. Cultural focus links the purpose and core conceptual notions of netnography to the guiding principles of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and other fields that use ethnographic approaches. Social media data differentiates netnography from traditional ethnography and other methods such as surveys, focus groups, and personal in-depth interviews. Immersive engagement distinguishes netnography from more

experience-distanced methods of understanding social media data such as content analysis, text mining, quantitative modeling, and big data analytics, and adds the deep human insight that comes from informed cultural reflection. Finally, netnographic praxis sets netnography apart from generic forms of online or digital ethnography, or other well-known approaches to online research such as Hine's 'virtual ethnography' (2000) or her later 'ethnographies of the Internet' (2015).

When all four elements are present together, the work can be nothing other than a netnography. If you wish to create a netnography, these four elements are your guide. First, choose a topic of study that contains a cultural focus and then find rich veins of informative cultural data in the communications of social media. Carefully design and execute your research in relation to the netnography procedures and guidelines that will rigorously structure your investigation and its scientific presentation. Engage in a relevant manner with those mediated cultural worlds. The following section expands on the relation between the procedural steps of netnography and the approach's grounding in cultural focus, social media data, participation, and netnographic praxis. After this, the chapter will proceed to explain how to begin doing netnography by choosing appropriate initial research questions.

The Six Procedural Movements of Netnography

Many who understand ethnographic research scoff at the idea of a simple set of steps or guidelines to describe the process. They are right to be skeptical. Ethnography is undoubtedly more complex and far more contextualized than any bare bones procedural guideline can address. However, brain surgeons start out by being able to identify the parts of the brain on charts. For teaching purposes, a systematic and disciplined approach is ever-important. So, what do we do?

In this version of netnography, I offer a repertoire of different operations in four general categories:

1. Interrogatory operations that help us ask better questions.
2. Data-collection operations that guide a systematic and methodically structured approach to building a dataset from a social media data site.
3. Data analysis, interpretation, and integration operations to provide a range of perspectives on findings.
4. Presentation options for conveying results, implications, and innovations.

Within these four categories are a range of more specific data operations. Using them, the researcher can construct the best netnography to suit the research question at hand. There is also a fair degree of creativity, novelty, and innovation that the big sandbox of the method invites in terms of combining elements and adapting the operations. One key element, however, where adaptation is not welcome is in bending or breaking the ethical rules of good research behavior. As you will learn in Chapter 6, you are expected to maintain a certain moral standard in netnography by following particular ethical research procedures.

Within these four general categories there are six operational sub-categories for undertaking a netnography, called movements or moves. There are six moves: initiation, investigation, immersion, interaction, integration, and incarnation. However, a netnography can also be conducted using a carefully chosen subset of them (this is explained in Chapter 7).

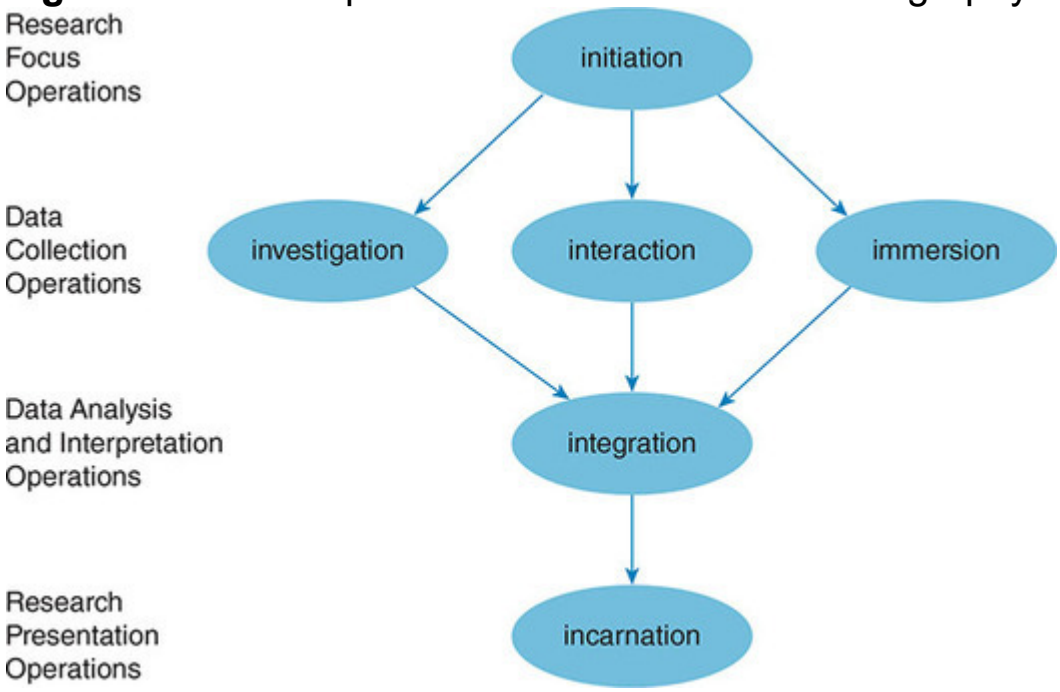
In the process of data collection an ethnography, perhaps more than any other method, is subject to frequent changes, revision and adaptation of research questions, shifts in focus, as well as alterations and substitutions of particular contexts and participants. Similarly, ethnographic research does not always have a clear start and end point. It is not uncommon, for instance, for a researcher to collect and analyze data, and then to reformulate the research questions and collect additional data to analyze. It is also not unusual to see your data sites as Heraclitus might, as dynamic ever-changing streams that you can engage with over decades without ever reaching some preternatural state of data saturation. Some ethnographic engagements will likely continue broadening and deepening for as long as you care to engage with them openly.

The six movements are intended as a starting point to give structure to the way we think about the conduct of netnography. They are a representational convenience that can convey a sense of the main practices one must perform when undertaking a research ethnography and how they flow together as the interconnected stages of a discrete project.

Explaining the Six Procedural Movements of Netnography

As represented in Figure 5.2, the big picture of the six movements of netnography covers: (1) initiation, (2) investigation, (3) immersion, (4) interaction, (5) integration, and (6) incarnation. The following sections explain the constituent parts contained in each of these six steps.

Figure 5.2 The six procedural movements of netnography



Movement 1: Initiation

The first movement of a netnography gives the project its investigatory direction. Netnography is an intentional research act, and the first movement focuses on its all-important objective. Does the research investigate a particular online site or phenomenon? Or is it drawn by a particular construct or theory of interest from past research? Is there a trend at work in the world that the researcher believes to be worth investigating? In this initial investigatory phase, the researcher is likely to think about many possible topics and

approaches, and then to craft and hone the research question so that it can lead to some sort of research design that includes netnographic inquiry. In this initial movement we would also include all sorts of informational, organizational, regulatory, and administrative preparation for the act of research. These would include becoming informed about the ethical considerations and relevant research ethics procedures of the netnographic research, attaining ethics approval from requisite regulatory bodies, and planning the study so that the type of data you collect will be appropriately matched to the research questions you wish to answer.

Movement 2: Investigation

The second movement maps out the investigative space of the project. Social media is a universe unto itself. There are currently over 3 billion active social media users in the world, with each averaging about 6 social media accounts, active across at least 30 major social media platforms which account for a lion's share of global social media traffic. At current rates of global involvement, about 1.3 million new social media users join the social media party every day. The second movement of the netnography is where the researcher narrows down this expansive and expanding field of communication, treating it not just as a public forum for communication and connection, but also as a cultural research site.

The investigation movement is directed by the focus imparted to it by the research question. This phase utilizes search engines and other automated means to seek and find traces that are relevant to the research. Search engines can reveal sites as well as individual conversations, topics and sub-topics, tags such as hashtags, and visual images or other non-textual representations. In this movement you will localize, examine, and interpret these traces in order to 'site' such communicative data as clues to lead you to generative netnographic data sites. One useful practice employed in this movement is landscape mapping. A netnographic landscape map is a visual representation of sites containing communications relevant

to a particular research question. Along with careful analysis and consideration, a landscape map can reveal unexpected commonalities and disjunctures that may lead to productive new paths of exploration. In this movement you will also make choices, which can always be revisited, about which sites you will focus on, and consequently which ones you are not going to study. There are concrete criteria that you will employ to help you make these decisions, and further focus your netnographic project. The result of movement 2 is a type of bounded conceptual space for your research immersion, a type of ‘siting’ of the project.

Movement 3: Immersion

Movement 1 directs the project by specifying its conceptual focus. Movement 2 launches into the vast universe of social media, encountering it mainly through search engines in order to map out investigative areas of interest. The third movement of netnography involves the researcher’s inhabitation of the bounded conceptual space of the project. The notion of immersion is drawn from ethnographic conceptions. Anthropologists like to compare human beings living in their culture to fish inhabiting water. Like water to fish, culture is invisible and taken for granted until the fish finds itself out of water. Likewise, ethnographic immersion is a liquid metaphor intended to imply that we dive deeply into the cultural pools of others, and not merely skim along their surfaces. Because this is netnography, however, rather than ethnography, the precise practices indicating immersion are somewhat unclear and require explication and specification. What does it mean to immerse oneself in a novel online topic rather than a new national culture? What is data immersion and how does it relate to netnography?

Immersion in netnography is data-centric. Between the finding of deep data and its collection is a general encountering of gentle streams, flowing rivers, and roaring tides of data that always threaten to submerge our project’s focus and intent. Despite that omnipresent threat, in the doing of netnography cultural experiences must be had.

In the first section of this chapter, we learned how netnography's cultural focus encompassed: (a) the use of new language and symbols; (b) the expression of various online rituals; (c) the adoption of new identities; (d) the telling of stories, sharing of beliefs, and passing along of powerful images and media; (e) the inculcations and reinforcement of value and value systems; and (f) relations of power and group dynamics. Thus, netnographers in the course of their research may encounter new languages and rituals that need to be learned and deciphered, as well as new identities, values, stories, and hierarchies that can be identified and experienced. Exploring how any or all of these elements play out in synchronous as well as asynchronous communications constitutes an invitation to the sort of personal, intellectual, and emotional involvement that characterizes netnographic immersion.

Finally, netnographic immersion enacts data collection and indexing strategies. These ensure that large amounts of data are examined and noted in research notes that are called entries into an immersion journal. These notes can be composed of various types of data, such as textual, graphic, photographic, and audiovisual, but a key point is that the amounts of data collected in the journal are not overwhelming. The quality of the data is emphasized rather than the quantity. Much of the immersion movement is spent in a quest for elusive high quality or 'deep' data, which may carry forward into various strategies of interaction.

Movement 4: Interaction

Interaction consists of a phase with explicit questioning or research engagement with online participants. Immersion in the third movement is already a type of interaction, albeit one that is largely unobtrusive and non-invasive. The researcher is already interacting with different field sites, searching them, observing them, downloading parts of them, writing analytic and observational fieldnotes about them. And for some netnographies, this immersion will be sufficient to answer their research questions. There need not,

for these netnographies, be an explicit stage of interaction with online participants. However, many netnographies will find that particular nuances or even large themes still elude them. Sometimes, particular topics that are important to the investigation are not discussed online, or they are not discussed in sufficient depth. At other times, meanings are unclear. At still other times, making a positive identification of the people behind the messages is crucial theoretically – for example, a study of Venezuelan refugees' online behavior would likely want to have some confirmatory interviews with people who are definitely Venezuelan refugees. Identification is also useful in order to gain a more holistic cultural and social understanding of the communications of particular peoples, if that is the project's theoretical focus. Clarification is often required and this is when netnographic observation usefully extends into other and related types of investigation such as online interviews. An interaction entrée strategy will help the researcher be deliberate in the way in which she enters into these more obtrusive forms of data collection. In netnography, we have several options for these interactions, including not only interviews, but also online participation, the creation of a netnographic interaction research webpage, and the use of digital diaries and mobile ethnography techniques.

Movement 5: Integration

The lines between data collection, interpretation, and analysis are amorphous in ethnography and netnography. Data is being interpreted, analyzed, and collected almost from the initiatory moment when you decide on sites or topics. That analytical and interpretive activity intensifies as you begin to investigate which sites to research and continues through the various choices, interactions, and immersions of your netnography. Ethnography and netnography are both iterative processes, where the vagaries of analysis and interpretation often necessitate return trips to both the field and the literature to collect more data and to sharpen your understanding of

both the empirical field site and the theoretical literature base. In netnography, with its provision of persistent contact with field or data sites, the temptation to return can be especially strong. Nonetheless, at some point, data collection slows down considerably, even if it does not fully cease. And at that point, the integrated analysis and interpretation of the corpus of collected, co-created, and created data move center stage – and when this happens you are in netnography's fifth movement.

Integration in netnography is an ongoing process of decoding, translating, cross-translating, and code-switching between parts and wholes, between data fragments and cultural understandings. When you became immersed in online communications, you encountered many strange new cultural elements that required decipherment and holistic viewing in order to extract their meaning. These may have included translating new words, terminologies, and expressions, perhaps even new poses and types of avatar bodies or digitally augmented selfie photos. They could have included patterns of significant behavior, novel technological affordances, routines, habits, procedures, and other meaningful practices. Roles and moralities, personalities and status – all of these things once may have seemed unfamiliar, but by movement 5 they will have become recognizable, nameable, mundane, even intimate. As you relate your understanding of your findings to your research question, you will engage in acts not only of analysis (breaking down into parts) and interpretation (building and connecting wholes) but also of integration, the mutual and co-constitutive collision of perspectives that produces something new. In movement 5, the sought-after depth of cultural understanding becomes applied to the task of answering the research question. Researchers will collate data, code it, categorize it, and often wield humanistic, phenomenological, existential, discourse, and hermeneutic methods of interpretation. There is room for a variety of approaches in this wide-ranging movement. As the integration phase encourages answers to resolve from our repeated close encounters with the data, literature,

imagination, and site, we begin to build the representations that will incarnate the project and bring it to a stage of completion.

Movement 6: Incarnation

To incarnate means to put into or represent in a concrete form. In the final movement, a netnography, which began as an idea, a question about the world, finds its form as research. In order to be complete as an academic endeavour, a research project must be communicated. Incarnation is thus communication. Netnographies have become term papers and class projects, master's degree and doctoral dissertations, poster sessions in conferences, conference papers and presentations, full papers in academic proceedings, journal articles and the chapters of books. The purpose in all of them is to bring to life and also to communicate. These productions should be rigorous in that they deliberately and precisely use some of the approaches described as netnographic praxis. They should be readable, accessible, and interesting to the audiences they intend to reach. They should include clear communication of the method of netnography, the netnographic data operations, the netnographic dataset, and representation of the data. We can consider the groundedness, novelty, resonance, and perhaps above all, the usefulness of our netnographic research. Quality netnography must clearly and compellingly answer its stated research question. As a consequence, the results of the research might be trusted to inform important decisions, and inspire further work and enhanced understanding of subject topic areas.

Initiation, investigation, immersion, interaction, integration, and incarnation. These are the six movements of netnography. With a description of them concluded, we are almost ready to begin the exercises and discussions that will guide you through your own netnographic research project. The remainder of this book is structured to take you through these six research movements. In fact, after a necessary discussion about conducting netnography in teams, this chapter transitions into the first movement. As with all

scientific inquiry, we will begin with a question. Will you be conducting your netnography solo, as an individual? Or will you be doing netnography, as so many people do, in coordination with others? Will you be enacting your netnography as the member of a team?

Doing Netnography in Teams

Although considerable research has been done by individual netnographers, a lot of netnography has also been done by teams. Almost from the beginning, groups began applying the ideas of netnography in their co-conducted and co-authored research. Kozinets and Handelman's (1998) early work on boycotting and consumer activism was part of a team effort, as was Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry's (2003) netnography. So was Nelson and Otnes (2005) and Muniz and Schau (2005). From the beginning, these groups were constructing what 'team' meant when applied to netnography.

An important key to advancing social science in general is to systematize and develop its use by a range of different team forms. So much is known about teams, leadership, and teamwork from the organizational and management literatures. Yet so much is still to discover when it comes to the practices and functions of particular research teams, such as ones pursuing netnography. There are a number of lessons we can gather from some past team netnography experiences.

Division of labor can be handled in a number of different ways. You can divide by online site, by county, by netnography movements or operations, or by perspective of researcher. I've been teaching netnography to my students since 1998 and I've observed that my student teams usually split up netnographic data collection by platform. One student would run a data collection operation on Reddit, another on Instagram, and a third on Facebook. Someone would try to hunt down some useful forums. Another would take responsibility for Twitter. After several weeks of data collection, they aggregate all the results and together discuss where to focus and what to do next. One issue I have noted is that they generally find it a challenge to aggregate the data in one place where they all have

access to it. Organization is key! Often, having a single online repository, with folders (like a Google Drive folder with sub-folders) is a very good idea for team work.

In team projects I have been involved in, we were often able to usefully divide tasks. I wrote Kozinets et al. (2010) with Kristine, Sarah, and Andrea. Kristine was a visiting scholar for much of the study. Sarah was a PhD student. And Andrea was a professor at a university across town. We did all our meetings in person. We were researching an online phenomenon, collecting data from 91 discrete data sites (each of them a blog created by an influencer given a free product as part of an influencer marketing campaign). We had carefully divided who would be monitoring which blogs, and over which time periods. We had frequent meetings to ensure that we were collecting data in ways that were useful to the project and the team. And we discussed the analysis a lot, in team meetings that were always respectful, but often intellectually demanding and rigorous. Each of us brought data of our own to the meeting, but we also were always trying to combine it with data from other team members. One thing we did not do, which I regret, was keep individual immersion journals and use them to discuss our different personal perspectives on the work.

Another way to run a netnography team is to set up a global network that divides tasks by nation and language. This was how I worked with eleven other researchers in Egypt, Moldova, Indonesia, Ukraine, Italy, Brazil, Uruguay, the Philippines, and India, to root out the barely hidden social media marketing practices of big global tobacco companies on a project we conducted for the Washington-based Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. Each researcher conducted investigative data-collection operations leading to some personal interviews in the country whose culture they were embedded in and with which they were familiar. Rossella, Silvia, Jerome, Maribel, Abu, Eni, Ruxandra, Antonina, Mridula, Verónica, Ilona, Ulli, and I consulted frequently on procedure. We met in smaller groups over Skype several times. We also took part in ongoing conversations

that involved the whole group over email. Each team member collected data from social media data sites and from a common interview guide we adapted for local purposes and different interviewee participants (usually either tobacco brand ambassadors, or media industry insiders). Just a few of the partners created advanced models with both investigative and interactive data (Maribel, Rossella, Silvia, and I). We never met in person, and most of the members I have still never met in the flesh.

Important additional clues to netnographic teamwork are provided in the article by Minowa, Visconti, and Maclaran (2012) in which they describe being a contemporary global academic team doing multi-sited cultural work and then collaborating on a finished ethnographic product. The basis of their collaborative ideal is easily understood. Meanings can be interpreted best when the interpreters are ‘familiar with the historical, social, and cultural context in which they are conveyed’ (p. 483). Thus, the researchers conducted ‘an ethnography of desire and imagination in the transforming cities’ that they each currently inhabited (New York City, Leicester, and Milan). Introspection by each researcher on the meanings associated with local cultures with which they are familiar played a large role in the data collection and interpretation which the three researchers shared with one another.

They end up deriving a name for the approach, ‘xenoheteroglossic autoethnography’, which they define as a form of ethnographically-driven introspection from researchers hailing from multiple countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. However, the actual autoethnography they produced was surprisingly impersonal. The product seemed as if it assumed that the naturalized and now totalized culture was something that the authors could uniquely channel without recourse to significant personal depth and intimate disclosure. We are left wondering about the role of personal factors such as socioeconomic status, occupation and educational cultures, sexual orientation, and the habituses they provide. Do these important cultural lenses not alter the way we would work in teams,

and the different cities we might inhabit – and reveal? Could those individual differences and personal elements of individual interpretations be gently but firmly questioned by the interaction with other research team members, brought into the light, and further examined?

The idea of xenoheteroglossic autoethnography leads me to think about a more intersectional form of netnography where a team of researchers uses the opportunity provided by netnographic team meetings to plan data collection, discuss search, share data, plan interactional data-collection strategies, and disclose their personal reflections, as operationalized in the immersion journals each team member will be keeping (see Chapter 10). In intersectional team-based netnographies, we would expect to see cogent inclusion and analysis of the divergent perspectives of the researchers, as their research and personal experiences differentially refract the phenomenon under study. Medrado and Muller (2018), for example, provide a rich portrayal of the intersectional perspective of black Brazilian mothers represented on a feminist blog/media platform. Alongside this, they present a cultural and historical unpacking that studies the digital activism and social conflicts created when a range of feminisms intersect on the site. Using individual immersion journals to systematize a similar process, teams can build upon the strengths of personal ethnographic viewpoints to expand into multiple research perspectives. As we have learned in this section, the organization of data by teams is important and can be facilitated by use of a central online depository. Division of labor is also important, and some alternatives that this section discusses are dividing work by online site, by county, by netnography movements or operations, or by perspective of the researcher. With this brief set of guidelines in place to help steer your team netnography, it is time to slide into the first movement of netnography, the interrogatory movement. Are you ready to start a project? Are you ready to start thinking about asking research questions?

Asking Good Questions

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying that if he had an hour to solve a problem and his life depended on the solution, he would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, because once he knew the proper question, he could solve the problem in less than five minutes. If Einstein says that asking the right questions is so crucial that he would stake his life on it, we should probably believe it.

Because research questions are incredibly important to the success of your netnographic project, this section is dedicated to helping you construct and focus research questions appropriate for netnography. As Belk et al. (2013: 17–20) point out, ‘there are two basic sources of inspiration for original, important research questions: prior research, and empirical phenomena’. Prior research can be conceptual or theoretical, but its most important aspect will be its abstractions, the constructs that it uses, and the specified relationship between them, which is theory. Empirical phenomena encompass contexts such as sites or events, types of behavior, or even types of social actors. For beginner researchers – and to be frank for seasoned professionals too – it can often be difficult to distinguish whether a conceptual research area or an empirical phenomenon has already been sufficiently understood. In order to help, this chapter has a series of exercises and guidelines to get you closer to that goal post of a thoughtful, significant, innovative, and intriguing research question.

Topics and Angles

I propose that there are two major parts to a research question. The first is the topic of the question. All research questions have a particular topic, which is its subject or focus. The topic is an answer to the question ‘What exactly is the concept that you will investigate?’ Topics need not be concrete, but can be abstract. You could be studying faith, sexual orientation, or cyber-bullying, or you could study a particular online site, or certain sites that foster climate denial, neoliberal beliefs, or anti-immigrant nationalism. As White (2017: 43) suggests, you could begin writing your research question topic with a single sentence. Simply fill in the blank:

> I want to investigate _____.

After you decide on a topic, you can refine that topic endlessly. Topics and questions are infinitely malleable. Let us say that you started out by stating that you want to investigate the topic of cyber-bullying. Your follow-up refinement could be as follows:

> I want to investigate the cyber-bullying of young Asian females by non-Asians.

Research questions also have a particular angle of inquiry or focus. This is their second part. The angle of inquiry is the answer to the question ‘What do you want to know about the topic?’. The angle of inquiry provides important boundaries that define the question, fencing in what it includes and what it excludes. The more specific the angle of the question becomes, the narrower is the investigation. Being precise can be a good thing, but there are often trade-offs between being focused in your questioning, and being either overspecific or context-bound, and being interesting. Particularly with qualitative techniques like netnography, you probably are best

advised to keep your questions fairly wide and open enough at the beginning to allow surprises and the opening up of unexpected but potentially fruitful new pathways to explore. Consider the following extended example, in which you would once again fill in the blanks:

> I want to investigate _____ in order to learn who/what/where/when/whether/how or why they _____ so that we (as a field) can better understand _____.

Creswell (2009: 129–31) suggests that you should try using exploratory verbs such as ‘discover’, ‘understand’, ‘explore’, ‘describe’, or ‘report’ in your research question. As an example, we might add an angle to the more specific question about Asian female cyber-bullying as follows:

> I want to investigate the cyber-bullying of young Asian females by non-Asians in order to build a contextualized understanding of the racist attitudes, roles, rituals, and identities that circulate on social media.

Risk-Free Questioning

With the fill-in-the-blanks options of the section above, you may have already begun thinking about your research question. This section offers a further set of exercises to focus on the conceptual topic of your research question. Your topical focus will inevitably be shaped by a variety of forces, not only your curiosity and idiosyncratic thirst for particular kinds of knowledge, but also the extant current of interest and thought running through your academic field, your particular academic department, and your colleagues, perhaps even something you saw recently in the media or heard in another research presentation. As well, you may be working in a team. If so, landing on a particular topic may require some advocacy, discussion, and negotiation. The topical interest you institute into your research question will direct you to locate your netnography in certain areas, and the angle of your question will cause you to look for particular kinds of data within those particular areas. In order to begin learning more about creating research questions, let us begin to practice with a no-risk exercise that focuses in on a particular theoretical or conceptual area that you are comfortable exploring.

5.1 Exploring the Conceptual Basis of a Practice Research Question (Project Exercise)

Step 1 Pick a Practice Research Question relating to an abstract theoretical concept in your field.
Step 2 If you can, discuss your question with a classmate. Then, together, explore that theoretical topic using a search engine such as Google Scholar. Look at a few academic articles. Track down a few references. Read a few abstracts. Try to learn, with an investment of about 15 minutes of time, what has been written about this theoretical topic. What discernible patterns exist in the literature about this topic? What gaps do you detect in our collective knowledge? What unspoken assumptions could you challenge? Write down a summary of what you have learned.

Step 3 Based on what you have learned, refine and revise your research question into a new research question that more clearly specifies the research gap that you have identified.
Step 4 (Optional): Repeat the procedure one or two times.
Step 5 Step 5: After you are done, discuss or write down, what you have discovered.

Situating Netnography in Research Traditions

In netnography, although we are using social media data, we often situate our work within particular fields such as nursing or queer studies, and within particular research traditions that are related to cultural topics and their consideration, such as hermeneutic, phenomenological, critical, or neopositivist traditions. These fields and traditions guide us to consider particular kinds of research questions, which I have called ‘particular angles of inquiry’. For example, netnographic inquiry within a hermeneutic research tradition would likely consider questions regarding how cultural bases shape particular kinds of experience and behavior. Work within a phenomenological research tradition might consider questions about the essence of people’s lived experiences. Work within a critical research tradition would lead us to develop questions about the factors contributing to the oppression of some marginalized group of actors, and how to alleviate those conditions. Work that comes from a neopositivist research tradition might prompt us to inquire about the factors that explain a particular phenomenon or the consequences of its occurrence (see Belk et al., 2013: 20–26). You might look back at your initial theoretically-derived research question exercises, which you may have completed above, and examine them in light of these research traditions. Do your theoretically-derived research questions resonate with any of these research traditions? Do they contain any related angles of inquiry?

Conceptual or theoretical topics are one source of inspiration and focus for your netnographic research question. Now let’s turn to the other source: an empirical phenomenon. Let’s begin with another exercise, one which is similar in structure, but actually quite different in focus from the one you just completed. To continue learning more about research questions, we will continue our practice with another risk-free exercise in which you now focus in on an empirical phenomenon, for example, a context such as a site, event, type of behavior, or social actor.

5.2 Exploring the Empirical or Phenomenal Basis of a Practice Research Question

Step 1 Pick a Practice Research Question relating to an empirical phenomenon that you find worthy of investigation.
Step 2 If you can, discuss your question with a classmate. Then, together, explore the empirical phenomenon using search engines such as Google and Google Scholar. What has been written about the phenomenon already? What news articles? What academic articles? Read a few abstracts and the first few paragraphs of the news stories and articles. Try to learn, with an investment of about 15 minutes of time, what has been written about this empirical phenomenon. What discernible patterns exist in the literature about this topic? What gaps do you detect in our collective knowledge? What unspoken assumptions could you challenge? Next, write down a summary of what you have learned.
Step 3 Based on what you have learned, refine and revise your research question into a new research question that more clearly specifies the research gap that you have identified.
Step 4 (Optional): Repeat the process one or two times.
Step 5 After you are done, discuss or write down what you have discovered. How does it compare with the abstract conceptual exercise that you completed above? How was it similar? How did it differ?

Situating Netnography in Empirical Phenomena

A majority of netnographic research seems to begin with interest in an empirical site or actual phenomenon. This is unsurprising. Ethnographic research is empirically embedded; this is its signature element. The history and traditions of ethnographic research are located in exploration of new cultural contexts. And yet, if netnography is intended as an academic enterprise, it cannot be entirely descriptive. It must move from being an exploratory depiction of a cultural phenomenon to an explanatory one, and to do that it must invoke related concepts and theories.

In the investigatory phase, new scholars often make an obfuscating mistake. They claim exclusivity on a term, rather than seeking to embed what they know in a conceptual network. For example, if I studied how media audiences conceived of themselves, and then invented the term ‘media collective’ to describe them, could I rightly claim that my contribution was in revealing this new construct? The answer is no. True, you may have coined a new term. However, the concept behind it is what is important, not the term. What exactly is a media collective, and how does it relate to other, known concepts such as ‘media audiences’, ‘fan groups’, and ‘imagined communities’? Sites can also, at first blush, seem highly unique. However, I advise against the type of idiosyncratic flag-raising in which a researcher lays claim to an exceptional or even one-of-a-kind concept or site, even in cases when they actually are studying an extreme case or example. If you want to make claims about how unique or unprecedented your case is, you may find that you have a very steep hill to climb. Much more advisable is to ‘argue that while yours may be an extreme case, the dynamics or properties you are focusing on can indeed be found elsewhere and are therefore worth explaining’ (Belk et al., 2013: 18).

All of this is to say that it is an incumbent obligation facing you as researcher to look far and wide for scholarly academic works that are

related to your conceptual topic – regardless of whether the exact same terms, particular sites, or exact same framing have been used by prior scholars. Although this type of positioning is considerably more work than simple terminological territory-claiming, the advantage is that you demonstrate to readers that you are contributing to an actual field of interest, one with a literature base and perhaps some already-present confusion that your study can rectify.

When considering how to research and position a study that is inspired by a particular empirical context or phenomenon, there are several useful guidelines you can follow. The first is to ask yourself 'What the heck is going on here that I find so interesting?'. You will need to be specific about naming exactly what it is about the site that you find to be unusual, extreme, or intriguing. As you name that quality, you transition your study from the empirical realm of descriptive depiction into the world of abstract concepts. Once you have this conceptual footing, you can ask whether the abstract concept you located in your empirical context is worth investigating further. To do this, you will need to undertake a critical reading of prior literature, just as you did in the exercise above. You might ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this concept widely studied already? If so, what are the patterns in that investigation?
- If widely studied, are aspects of it already taken for granted? Is there an opportunity to explore certain overlooked elements further, in a more systematic or focused investigation?
- Are there boundary conditions that are interesting and at work in this empirical context?
- Are there related concepts present under different names? How are they similar to and different from the way this concept presents itself in this empirical setting?
- Are there processes at work in this context that have not yet been discovered? Or that may be misunderstood? Or that may

vary in different contexts and settings? (See Belk et al., 2013: 17–20.)

Keeping in mind these questions, you might examine your second set of exercises, which you may have completed above. How are these concerns reflected in your empirically-derived research question? Does your answer to these questions help reveal a potentially novel contribution? How might the questions help you refine your empirically-derived research question's angles of inquiry?

Now that we have reached the end of this section, you should begin to get a sense about what is involved in constructing a research question based on two primary sources of inspiration, conceptual topics and empirical phenomena. You have gained some background information, and even some 'risk-free' practice, first in thinking about conceptual topics, and then about empirical phenomena. What is missing is some sense of how these two important elements work together. And work together they must, because as we are about to learn, their synergy is key not only to formulating effective research questions, but also to crafting viable research positioning for your entire inquiry. We turn to the next section in order to develop your understanding of the holistic nature of the research question and guide you towards its realization.

Meet-in-the-Middle

A meaningful, novel, and intriguing research question may be essential to the success of your netnographic project. But finding that research question at the very beginning of your project is probably a bit unlikely. Why? Because research questions are subject to change. They are not carved in stone! Reviewers, friendly and otherwise, suggest new research questions. Editors and associate editors offer them up. Researchers and co-authors debate them at any stage of the research project. I have sometimes performed a last-minute fine-tuning on the final research question after a submitted manuscript has been conditionally accepted for publication. My last-ditch research question revision acted as a sort of ritual tightening that assists in aligning the paper's question and findings. The reason for all this activity is because research questions are dynamic. And it is because of something that I have termed 'the meet-in-the-middle research process'.

In netnographic research, the meet-in-the-middle research process goes something like this. The researcher is inspired by a research focus, which usually derives either from a fascination with a supposed gap within an abstract, conceptual, theoretical domain, or an alleged contribution from an empirical, contextualized phenomenon. Let's say that the theoretical topic derives from something called 'the world of ideas', while the empirical phenomenon is situated in something we can call 'the world of things'. As the researcher engages in the research, the two worlds are forced into interplay. Let's assume that she is inspired by a theoretical concept such as affordance theory, the tourist gaze, or authenticity. She reads some literature, and is probably familiar with more literature, and tries to locate a particular gap in that literature, some lacuna that is unclear, problematic, contradictory, or unexplored. Then, in a difficult matching process, she tries to locate a good empirical site in order to explore that topic. In netnography, that site could be a particular communication platform such as

Facebook, or part of it such as a public group, or it could range across a number of platforms, and be linked conceptually or by a classifier such as a tag or hashtag.

Now, the rubber from the world of ideas hits the road of the world of things. The researcher begins investigating the empirical phenomenon, collecting data and analyzing it. After drawing some initial conclusions, she finds many interesting things, some of which relate to the topic, and others which seem very interesting but are not as related to the topic. But often these findings will not exactly fit into the preordained gap the researcher has found. They might relate to it somehow, but not quite. At this point, what does she do? She keeps in mind her initial findings, and goes back to the theoretical literature. Delving into the literature with more focus than before, she can locate precise theoretical areas where there are (or are not) gaps that more closely fit the findings her actual empirical work reveals. Similarly, once she has a clearer focus from the theoretical fine-tuning she is now performing, she can re-encounter both her collected dataset and her ongoing fieldwork in order to focus in on specific phenomena that illuminate aspects of the new, and more refined, theoretical gap she has identified.

Eventually, over a number of iterations between the world of ideas and the world of things, the researcher identifies a specific and coherent gap in the theoretical and conceptual literature, and matches it with evidential findings drawn from the empirical phenomenal field site. The question has been polished so as to meet the redirected answer. The two worlds have met, and they meet in the middle: somewhere between theory and phenomenon, between preconceived abstract ideas and material reality, between the world of ideas and the world of things.

If you are a novice researcher, what is the bottom line on the meet-in-the-middle process? There are three takeaways, as far as I can see. The first is that you should expect research questions to come and go. Your first, second, and third iterations do not need to be

perfect. Research questions are vehicles that take you on your journey. Sometimes you will ride all the way with the very first one. But other times you will switch vehicles and lines, several times, to get to your destination. The second takeaway is related to the incrementality of this change, and suggests that you should always be working with your past research question, honing it and revising it. You should never be throwing your question away! Adjust it, fine tune it, make it better. Go back to the literature. Go into your dataset. See where the two can meet. Find the question that matches the phenomenon in the literature. Find the answer that matches the question in the data. Sometimes the process will broaden your theoretical topic, while at other times it will be narrowed. Expect it to change, but start somewhere that is as close to your genuine interests as you can. This is the theoretical process you will follow in a netnography. Theory and social media data will meet in the middle. And the final takeaway is about managing your own expectations. Expect the greatness of your project to be revealed gradually and over time, rather than in an unearthly flash of indelible insight. It is totally unnecessary to begin your netnography project by driving yourself insane trying to locate that perfect, unexplored research domain, that fascinating anomalous and unique phenomenon upon which you establish your research question. Follow the process of meet-in-the-middle, be patient, be systematic, and your project's unique and important theoretical and substantive insights will undoubtedly emerge.

Netnographic Research Questions

Much of this chapter applies equally well to most cultural or qualitative research projects as it does to netnographic research. The importance of asking good questions is a common element. All research questions have topics and angles, and all of them have a fairly similar structure. Similarly, the researchers who initiate most qualitative research projects draw inspiration from theoretical topics and concepts, or from their own interest in an empirical context or setting. The meet-in-the-middle process, in which theories and contexts bump up against one another until a supportable and novel research positioning can be expressed in a research question, also can be widely applied.

So, we might ask, what makes a netnographic research question unique, if anything? In order to discover the answer to that important question, you must first do a bit of homework with our next exercise.

5.3 Finding Unique Netnographic Research Questions

1. Using a search engine such as Google Scholar, or a general repository of research such as academia.edu or researchgate.net, search for some recent publications that use netnography. Three or four articles that have been published in the last one or two years will be sufficient.
2. Skim through the articles, looking for their research question. What are the research questions that they used? Write them down.
3. Can you identify the topic in each question? Can you identify the angle of inquiry?
4. What other patterns do you notice in the research questions? How would you describe them?

Some recent research questions from netnographies that I found were:

1. How do female tourists conceive of their tourist experience and how they ‘gaze’ on Macao? (Zhang and Hitchcock, 2017)
2. What are the affordances of e-reading and do they enhance the reading experience? (D’Ambra et al., 2017)
3. How can we better understand orthodontic patients’ decision about receiving orthodontic care by studying how people talk about their orthodontic desires and experiences online? (Pittman et al., 2017)
4. How has the merging of technology and the music industry affected how freelance female popular musicians in the United States music industry negotiate their career development? (Lorenz, 2017)
5. (i) How does the evolution of a person’s identity conflict correspond with the evolution of the extended self?; (ii) What extended self strategies do people utilize to cope with their identity conflicts?; and (iii) How do social norms shape the enactment of these extended self strategies? (Ruvio and Belk, 2018)
6. In research I am currently conducting on activist discourse in social media and the conception of utopia, my research questions are these: How do social media discourses of utopianism challenge the institution of capitalism itself? What contours do these challenges assume? What type of activism or clicktivism might these discourses represent? What are its implications for developing our understanding of both utopianism and activism? (In Chapters 12 and 13, we will be working with one of the datasets from this research project.)

Patterns in Netnographic Research Questions

When I look at some of the research questions that I have asked in my own published netnographies, I see how intertwined the research question is with the theoretical positioning of the article itself. Consider first an example from the 'networked narratives' article that my co-authors and I published about 'word of mouth marketing'. This paper had its origin in an opportunity to work with a digital marketing agency on a campaign to promote a new smart phone with 91 online influencers. In 2007, when we collected this data, the term being used was 'word of mouth marketing' or 'WOMM', and this was still a fairly small and marginal practice. We currently refer to this type of promotion as 'influencer marketing', and it is currently a much more widespread and mainstream phenomenon than it was in 2007:

> Yet, despite awareness of the complexity of these communal relationships, marketers are just beginning to understand the formation, reaction, and effects of communally-based marketing promotions. This article's contribution is based on empirical inquiry that attempts to further develop the understanding already captured in the coproduction model and to answer the following three questions: How do communities respond to community-oriented WOMM? What patterns do WOM communicator strategies assume? and Why do they assume these patterns? (Kozinets et al., 2010: 73)

Because this was a fairly new phenomenon, and we had the opportunity to study it in context, we had a range of exploratory types of questions we could explore, as well as attempting to make a fundamental theoretical contribution to our understanding about how markets and social media communities interact with one another. How do communities respond to word of mouth marketing? What patterns do communicator strategies assume? And why do they

assume these patterns? The questions are ‘how?’ (a process-based question, requiring some description of a process), ‘what?’ (a structure-based question, requiring some description of communication patterns), and ‘why?’ (an explanatory question, requiring some description of underlying causal forces).

Although you can also see how particularly the explanatory ‘why’ component of the research question is part of the broader positioning of the article, you can recognize an even broader sociocultural set of questions at play in the ‘networks of desire’ paper, which I quote from here:

> Yet, for a central concept, the term ‘desire’ has received relatively little reexamination and extension. In this article, we reboot the concept of desire. Updating desire, we ask how it is changed by contemporary technology. What happens to desire when consumers collectively combine and connect their cravings through technology in new and unprecedented ways? How can we bring novel understanding to bear on this new reality? (Kozinets et al., 2017: 660)

That article was initiated when Rachel Ashman took my PhD seminar on netnography and social media research, and decided to study food porn as her final project. We continued the investigatory work, added Tony Patterson to the team, and decided to look at food porn and the empirical phenomenon of food image sharing using social media as an opportunity to learn something about desire in the age of connective technology. How is desire changed by contemporary technology? This was our broad, opening question, which we positioned as a counter-opinion to longstanding opinions that technology had a dampening or muting effect on human desire. What happens when consumers combine and connect their cravings through technology in new ways? This gave us an opportunity to explore and develop our variety of observations about the food porn

phenomenon. Finally, when we asked ‘How can we bring a new understanding to bear on this reality?’, we were opening the article up to introduce some new perspectives which included developing Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of ‘desiring machines’ (which they later reformulated into the notion of ‘agencements’, or assemblages), as well as a post-human view that networked human and nonhuman together into vast and variegated ‘networks of desire’ with an enhanced capacity for desire.

Guidelines for Netnographic Research Questions: Phenomena, Platforms, and Sites

There are no defined limits to netnographic research questions, but a good general guideline relates them back to what makes netnography a particular form of scientific inquiry. That is, netnographic research questions tend to focus on:

- Cultural phenomena manifesting online such as:
  - new languages, changes in, or forms of symbolic, communications;
  - social media rituals, postings, poses, and practices;
  - new identities, fashions, or social roles;
  - shared stories, beliefs, passionate interests, and desires;
  - values, value systems, and their exchange;
  - group dynamics, power structures, and hierarchies.
- Social media platforms and sites, and the way that they interact with other aspects of social existence, such as:
  - how particular platforms and sites are gendered, and react to gender or sexuality;
  - how particular topics are discussed on social media;
  - how people respond online to particular kinds of organizational or interpersonal communication directed to them;
  - how particular themes or concepts are revealed through online discourse, e.g., how authenticity is discussed and negotiated on classic rock sites (Henriques and Pereira, 2018), how engagement manifests in fashion blogs (Henderson et al., 2017), or how racial exclusion is extended into online social relations (West and Thakore, 2013);
  - how various instances of online communication differ from one another;
  - how people use social media to communicate or educate one another about practices, ideologies, or information they

might not gain elsewhere.

Sometimes, researchers will conduct netnographies about particular sites, such as the ‘whole food plant-based Aussies Facebook group’ (Chuter, 2018) or ‘young women’s blogs on Macao’ (Zhang and Hitchcock, 2017). Studies of sites can also be used for specific purposes, such as investigating how the ‘411 rallies’ were interpreted by studying international and national audience responses on the ‘international and Indonesian YouTube community’ (Setiadarma and Rizkiansyah, 2018).

As you are examining these past research questions and their angles of inquiry, it is important to consider the question words that they employ. If you are interested in locating people and topics in context, their locations in online sites, then ‘where’ may be an important question word. If you are interested in processes, then ‘how’ and ‘when’ may be important. If you are interested in the people who communicate through social media or discuss particular topics and their identities and roles, then ‘who’ may be important. Your most useful questions will often begin with ‘what’, as they relate to descriptions of things such as types of online stories, topics, or meanings. And despite conventional wisdom, I believe that cultural investigations can provide explanations for phenomena. Thus, although it can be a little bit tricky to deal with at times, asking ‘why’ a particular social or cultural process happens (but not, I should add, why someone is motivated to do something) can be useful.

A Starter Research Question

So where should you start? We have discussed quite a bit about research questions and netnographic research questions, and found that they have a particular form and a particular inclination. Further, we have learned that they are positioned in a very important place in between the empirical context and the research literature. If you are stuck, or want a recommendation for an opening, I am fond of the following 'starter' research question form found in Box 5.4.

> 5.4 Starter Form Research Question (Project Exercise)
>
> What can we learn about _____ [abstract topic X] from an empirical study of
> _____ [online phenomenon Y]?

In filling in the blanks, you should have already done a bit of homework. Actually, having gone through all of the exercises in this chapter will be enormously helpful. You should have already identified the strong and recognizable presence of abstract topic X, which we want to learn about, in your empirical online phenomenon. Similarly, you should have already established that abstract topic X is interesting, has a basis in relevant literature, and is part of an established research conversation – but perhaps one that could have some gaps, inconsistencies, omissions, or other problems.

This starter question gives us some good specificity to get our project going. But it also leaves us with lots of room to circle in on aspects of topic X later on, something called the 'double-funnel effect' of netnographic search resulting from investigative data operations. The question also allows you to explore in some depth the literature surrounding both abstract topic X and phenomenon Y,

including its online and perhaps other related manifestations. As you perform the netnography, immersing and participating in phenomenon Y, you will find that your analysis of the data drives you back to your research question, honing it. The gaps you identified earlier might shift or become more well-defined. The extant literature may refocus the questions. The questions may refocus the subsequent collection of data. Each will affect the other and become more precise as they gradually meet in the middle – delineating a theoretical sweet spot for your netnography.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we have transitioned from overview to how-to view. We began by gaining an understanding of cultural focus, social media data, participation, and a netnographic praxis – the four elements that distinguish netnography. Next, we learned the four operation categories (interrogatory, data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and presentation). Then, the six movements of netnography: initiation, investigation, immersion, interaction, integration, and incarnation. The chapter then offered some important practical considerations about conducting netnography as a member of a team, as so many netnographies are performed by groups of researchers. The chapter then proceeded into a discussion of the first stage of the process, initiation. We learned the two major parts to a research question, the research topic and the angle of inquiry, and then explored the initiating factors of research questions. Through a series of exercises, you discovered the relation of concept and phenomenon in netnographic research questions. Then, you were introduced to the meet-in-the-middle process and became acquainted with its implications for your own research. As the chapter drew to a close, it presented and analyzed a range of research questions. In total, the chapter provided clear guidelines concerning the basis of netnography, its six-step process, how to conduct it in teams, and how to construct and refine an appropriate netnographic research question.

Key Readings

Agee, Jane (2009) ‘Developing qualitative research questions: A reflective process’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4): 431–47.

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