

## 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.