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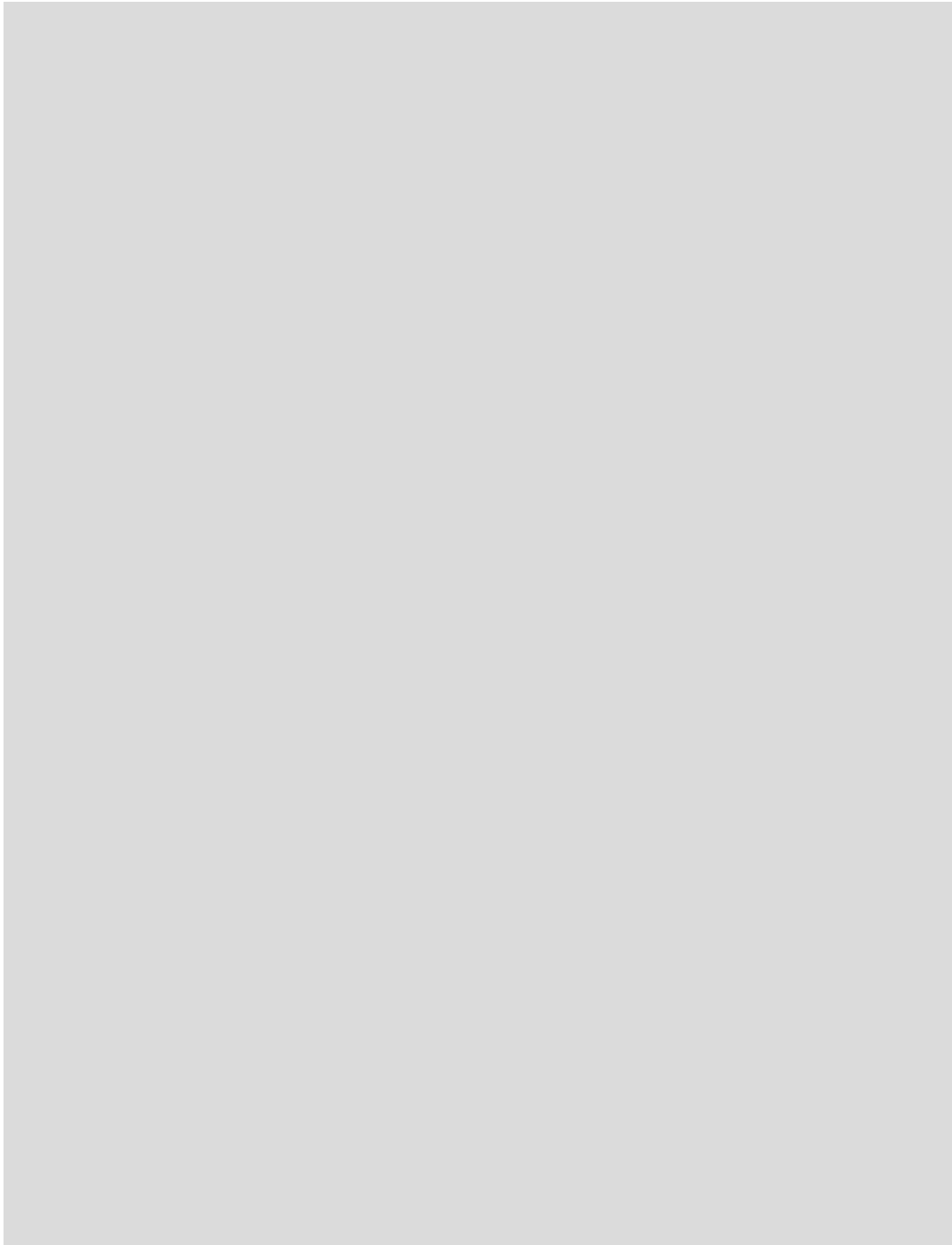
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NETNOGRAPHY

The Essential Guide
to Qualitative Social
Media Research



5 Praxis: Introducing Practices and Data Operations



Chapter Overview

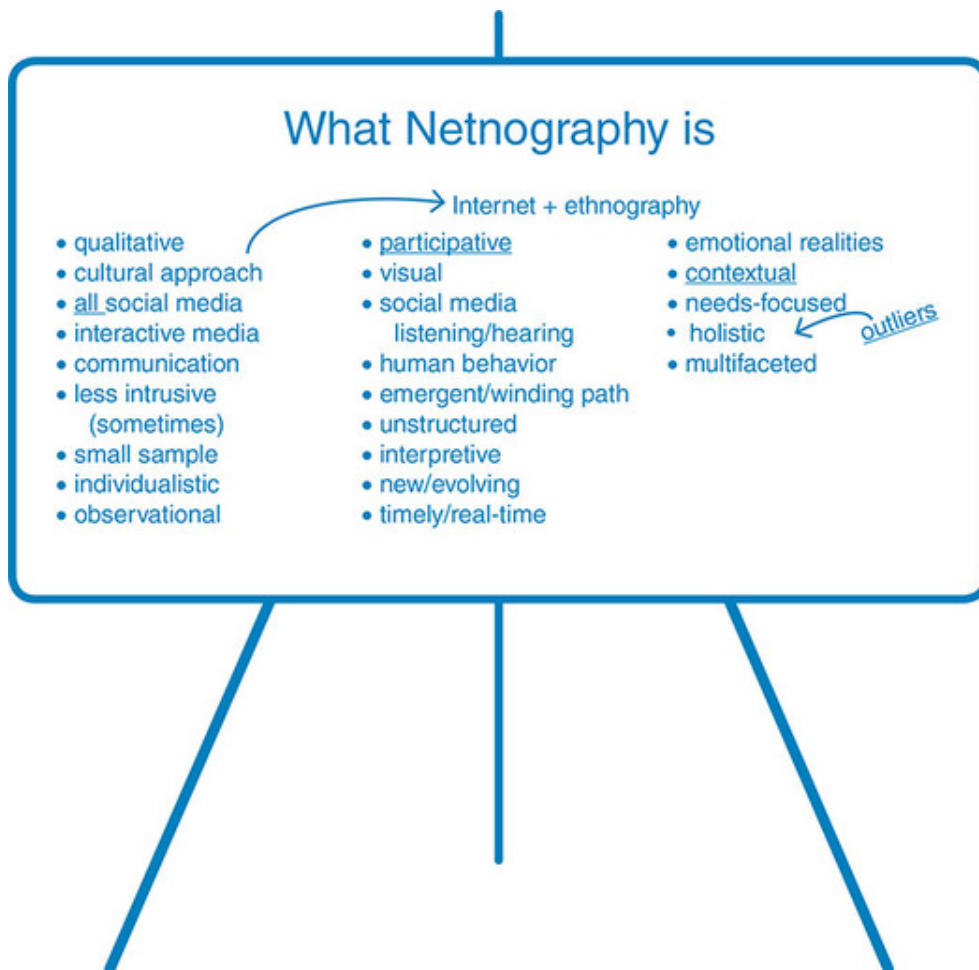
The purpose of this chapter is to initiate your understanding of netnographic praxis, the operational protocols of netnography, while also beginning your research project. We will start with a methodological overview that introduces the four elements distinguishing netnography from every other research 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](#)).

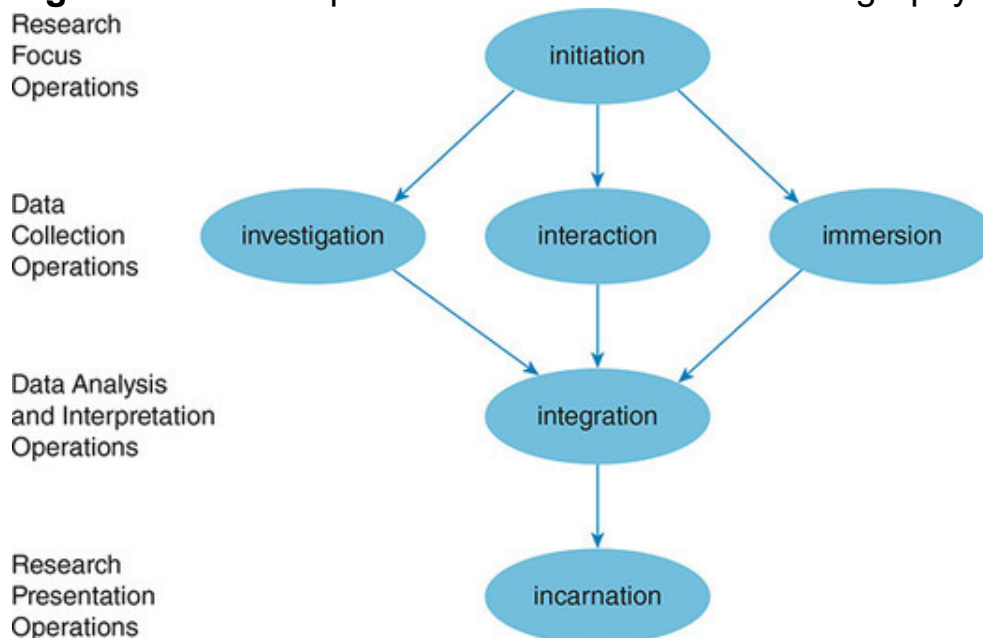
In the process of data collection an ethnography, perhaps more than any other method, is subject to frequent changes, revision and adaptation of research questions, shifts in focus, as well as alterations and substitutions of particular contexts and participants. Similarly, ethnographic research does 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?