Ethnographic Alternatives for Dialogic Marketspaces

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Abstract

With growth in social media, mobile communications, and location-based services, online transactional spaces are evolving in complex, multidimensional ways. We extend existing ways of doing online ethnography into new directions – to help organizations facing such environments in employing ethnographic methods in adaptive ways.

Online transaction and consumption spaces are evolving to become multifaceted, complex, and multimedia spaces. Approaches for online social ethnography need to evolve also. Starting with an evolutionary typology of online consumption and transaction spaces, the paper reviews the existing literatures on online ethnography and identifies the challenges and opportunities to evolve ethnographic approaches. The paper argues that online ethnography should take advantage of the opportunities offered by Web 2.0 and the imminent Web 3.0, and address the challenges it faces. Specifically, the paper proposes new directions for future evolution of online ethnographic methods. The key contributions of this paper are: (1) An evolitional typology of online consumption spaces, (2) A review of existing online ethnographic methods from the perspective of fast-transforming online environments, (3) Proposing of new directions for online ethnographic methods.

Keywords – Ethnography; Netnography; Virtual ethnography; Digital ethnography; Online consumption; Web 1.0, Web 2.0, Web 3.0
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Introduction

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

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

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

After this introduction, the paper is organized in five sections. In the next section, an overview of the fast-evolving world of the Internet and social media is presented – to set the stage for discussions of alternative ethnographic methods. Then, there is a section that presents – using the Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 terminology – a framework to view the evolution of online transaction and consumption spaces. In the following section, brief reviews and a comparison of
four online ethnographic methods are presented. Finally, prior to a short summary and conclusions section, there is an exploration of potential new directions for online ethnographic methods – especially in the future contexts of very pervasive global connectivity.

**Overview of Global Internet and Social Media**

As of November 2010, there were nearly cccc billion Internet users worldwide (for more details see figure 1). More importantly, contemporary Internet users are not passively consuming published contents of webpages. Rather, they are actively communicating with one another and often creating content (figure 2). They are using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, RenRen, Mixi, Cyworld, and more to deepen their social alliances and affiliations. By late 2010 Facebook, the globe’s largest online social network, had over 500 million users—which, were it a nation, would make Facebook the world’s third most populous after China and India. Along with these changes in social communication and behaviors, consumption is increasingly combining conventional and physical “marketplace” with the online “marketspace” (Rayport and Sviokla 1994).

**Table 1: Global Internet and Facebook Usage in 2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Region</th>
<th>Population (million)</th>
<th>Internet Users (million)</th>
<th>Facebook Users (million)</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>1014</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>With phenomenal growth in mobile networks, Africa would transform the nature of the Net and Social Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>3835</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>In China, QQ alone has over 1 billion accounts and over 400 million active users – Facebook presents very partial view of Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia/Oceania</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>162</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
North America | 344 | 266 | 149 | While remaining a hub of technological innovation through Web 2.0, this region would also start following trends from elsewhere

Latin America/Caribbean | 593 | 205 | 68 |

Source: Authors’ estimates based on data from www.internetworldstats.com

| Figure 2: Global Increase in Usage of Social Network and Blogs |
|---|---|---|
| % Ever done |
| Wave 1 Sep 06 | Wave 2 Jun 07 | Wave 3 Mar 08 |

Source: Netnography 08, presentation by Nunes in Netnography08 Conference, Germany (www.netnographyinsights.com)

Researchers are finding that to keep the marketing research relevant, they must keep pace with the changes in sociocultural contexts that result from “the third industrial revolution”. Prior studies (e.g., Bauman 2000) show that Internet has led to at least four transformations of today’s society: (1) media convergence, (2) mediated identities, and redefinitions of (3) social and (4) geographical boundaries. Each of these intertwined cultural contexts has direct impact on the research object, research design, and research methodology. In recent years, the approaches in the ethnographic study of the Internet have been diverse, with a proliferation of proposals on
using ethnography online. For instance, Snelson et al. (2010) propose that digital storytelling has arisen as a form of narrative expression that is crafted into a media production. Füller et al (2007) use netnography of “Niketalk” forum/site to observe the online innovation creation. All of these studies have contributed in advancing the qualitative marketing research in the context of online marketspaces. The possibilities and issues related to online consumption spaces – the side that consumers as people leading daily lives spend increasing swaths of time in, however, are still “relatively unexplored” (Hookway 2008). The massive transformational impact of social media on lifeworlds is getting recognized faster in popular media (e.g., Time magazine naming Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg the 2010 “Person of the Year”) than in research settings.

This paper focuses on the examination of online ethnographic methods and aims to offer some guidance for future research. Specifically, in next section of this paper, an evolutionary typology of online consumption spaces is developed. This is followed by a review of existing online ethnographic methods from the perspective of fast-transforming online environments. Next, several new directions for online ethnographic methods are proposed. A section with summary and concluding comments wraps up the paper.

**Online Transactional and Consumption Spaces: An Evolutionary Typology**

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

**Past: Web 1.0**

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

**Present: Web 2.0**

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

Compared to Web 1.0, Web 2.0 is characterized by:

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

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

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

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

**Future: Web 3.0**

There are many perceptions as to exactly what Web 3.0 era (2010-2020) would entail. Generally, it is estimated that Web 3.0 is the next generation of Internet and evolution of the semantic web; giving consumers, marketers, and researchers a more user focused, personalized, intelligent, and controlled web experience. Key features of Web 3.0 may include more developed mobile applications, socially-adept browsers such as RockMelt, personalized portals and search engines (e.g., iGoogle), and integrated connections among users (Yahoo 360). Web 3.0 based applications are also expected to include virtual reality locations where consumers can try things without physical travel or presence. An example would be the online virtual world such as today’s Second Life, where more than 1 million players, including offline merchants (e.g., Ford) participate. Table1 shows the summary of such changes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus of Relations</td>
<td>One-to-many with focus on companies</td>
<td>Many-to-many with focus on consumer communities</td>
<td>Many-to-many-one place with focus on consumer individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Content and Communication</td>
<td>Owning content and one way communication</td>
<td>Sharing content and two way communication</td>
<td>The semantic web</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Desktop</td>
<td>Laptop and mobile devices</td>
<td>Mobile devices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>Text/graphic based</td>
<td>Hypermedia, audio/visual data</td>
<td>Multimedia, audio/visual data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative Interface</td>
<td>Websites such as Yahoo!</td>
<td>Facebook, YouTube, Blogspot, flickr, Wikipedia, LinkedIn</td>
<td>iGoogle, Second Life, RockMelt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Approaches</td>
<td>Marketing 2.0 (consumer based): focus on &quot;messaging&quot; consumers</td>
<td>Transition from Marketing 2.0 to Marketing 3.0 (human centric): focus on the impacts of marketing on stakeholders, socio-cultural change, and environmental sustainability</td>
<td>Marketing 3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Such evolving online consumption spaces privilege and highlight certain features of interactions while diminishing or obscuring others. Likewise, these ongoing shifts confound traditional ethnographic methods of capturing and examining the cultural context in which consumption occurs. The ethnographic research landscape has changed dramatically since the inception of Web 2.0. A comprehensive review of the existing online ethnographic methods is, therefore, necessary and desirable at this stage – especially as a way to set the stage for ethnographic methods suitable for the ongoing Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 transition.

### Review of Existing Online Ethnographic Methods

Quantitative researchers have used the Internet extensively but ethnography researchers have been slow in adapting to online consumption space, in part due to limitations in the human-to-human connection points offered by Web 1.0. More recently, however, numerous ethnographic approaches for the elaboration of the online life and culture have emerged and
developed. Online ethnography refers to a number of related online research methods (e.g., "netnography" developed by Kozinets 1997; “virtual ethnography” from Hine 2000; and “digital ethnography” from Masten and Plowman 2003) that adapt to the study of the communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interactions. Online ethnographic methods have been increasingly used in various social science disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and marketing and consumer research. Especially, over the past decade, an impressive body of research work in marketing and consumer studies using online ethnographic methods have been published in top level journals and made contributions to the development of marketing discipline (e.g., Kozinets 2002, *Journal of Marketing Research*; Nelson and Otnes 2005, *Journal of Business Research*; Muñiz and Schau 2005, *Journal of Consumer Research*). Online ethnography, however, is under pressure from conflicting opinions concerning its fundamental assumptions (Are the online consumption space, communities, cultures are exotic and fundamentally different than everyday communication?), procedures (How to do fieldwork, observation, data collection?), and appropriate terminology of “online ethnography” (Whether it should be called “netnography”, “virtual ethnography”, or “digital ethnography”?).

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

**Virtual Dasein: Existing in Exotic Cyberspace/cyberculture**

“One way of approaching the ethnography of cyberspace is to treat it as virtual Dasein, in which the issue becomes being there in something-like-a-world yet still being in the world.”—Varisco (2007)
In his article “Virtual Dasein: Ethnography in Cyberspace,” Varisco (2007) recognizes the Internet has become a part of everyday life, but, consistent with early studies (e.g., Levy 2001), he argues that “Cyberculture as an imagined space escapes the philosophical stalemate in the representation of reality problem, because it is obviously a recognizable byproduct of technology, and distinctly a superorganic mode of relating to the imagined selves of other people.” For him, humans, technology and information all are necessary ingredients for understanding culture, unlike the “being in the world” is necessary for human being to exist in this society, interacting online is still a choice to be made: “none is actually born online; death in cyberspace is simply going offline”. Thus, he concludes that “except for the demonstrable ways in which interaction on the Internet or in virtual reality games affects human social behavior, cyberculture only exists as a simulation. Online personalities are merely constructed and inevitably ephemeral”. The human being just can act on what they say or hear via web, but what ultimately matters is when human beings do so in the real social world where they are situated in the different social categories. Varisco goes further to note that if human beings become cyborgs in the future, then humans will be more like the machines that enable cyberspace rather than be part of the online culture: “the illusion of material existence”.

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

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

**Netnography**

“*Method Specifically Designed to Study Cultures and Communities Online.*”—Kozinets (1997)

Introduced by Kozinets in 1997, netnography designates an interpretative method devised specifically to investigate the consumer cultures and communities present on the internet. Kozinets suggests that conventional ethnographic fieldwork can be meaningfully applied to computer-mediated interactions. The fieldwork includes direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings (Kozinets 2010). The data collected is mainly textual such as downloaded files of newsgroup postings, transcripts of MUD (multi-user dungeons) or IRC (Internet relay chat) sessions, and e-mail exchanges. As Kozinets (1998) suggests, netnography investigates the specific instance in which community is formed through computer-mediated communications.
Based on conventional ethnographic procedures, Kozinets (2002) recommends the five methodological stages and procedures for netnographic studies that include: (1) formulation of research questions and identification and gaining entree to appropriate online communities and cultures, (2) data collection that consists of the researcher’s field notes and the artifacts of the culture or community, (3) data analysis with focus on the cultural contextualizing of online data and classification, coding analysis and contextualization of communicative acts, (4) ensuring research ethnics by which netnography uses cultural information that is not given specifically to the researchers, and (5) research representation with focus on member checks to solicit other researchers’ opinions.

**Virtual Ethnography**

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

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

Virtual ethnography extends the notions of field and ethnographic observation from the exclusive study of co-present and face to face interactions, to a focus on mediated and distributed ones (Hine 2000). Instead of going to particular physical field site, virtual ethnography focuses more on online field connections. Although virtual ethnography is conducted using a predominance of (if not exclusively) online data, proponents of virtual ethnography argue that this does not undermine the quality and depth of the “thick description” generated. Hine (2000) suggests that researchers need to be mobile both virtually and physically so as to be fully
engaged in the ethnography of mediated interaction. In contrast to conventional ethnography that emphasizes long term immersion in the culture being studied, virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement rather than long term immersion (Hine 2000); thus, it allows the researchers to perform a comparative ethnography of more than one site at the same time. Since the early virtual ethnography studies (e.g., ethnography of WolfMOO by Rosenber 1992) were of text based virtual worlds, the data were mostly texts. Boellstorff (2008) notes that there is an emerging set of virtual ethnographies that are graphically based (e.g., Second Life).

Hine does not give prescriptive and exhaustive set of rules on how to do virtual ethnography (Hine 2000). Later, Hair and Clark (2003) identify a procedure for conducting virtual ethnography that includes: (1) identifying proactive communities, negotiating access, (2) interacting with participants, (3) conducting electronic depth interviews, (4) data interpretation, and (5) returning results and analysis to the community.

**Digital Ethnography**

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

In 2003, Masten and Plowman characterized digital ethnography as “next wave in understanding the consumer experience,” as “Digital Ethno enables participants to convey the real-time richness of their own lives and environments.” The proponents of digital ethnography argue that with the Web 2.0 increasingly permeating people’s daily lives and people increasingly accessing Web and engaging online communities on the go, the term netnography fails to capture the essence of consumer consumption environment that features ubiquitous digital devices (Iron 2010). In the era of Web 2.0, much of online ethnographic methods including netnography and
virtual ethnography are generally text-based techniques *transplanted* onto the internet; in that sense, they are not inherently or natively digital (Masten and Plowman 2003). Besides the conventional participant observation and passive observation, digital ethnography focuses on the participant self-reporting. As Masten and Plowman (2003) suggest, putting the power of observation in the participants’ own hands benefits the ethnographic research in two ways. One benefit is that of allowing participants to convey the real-time richness of their own lives and environments. Second, rather than simply acting as the source of data, participants get involved in the research process and share their insights on the topic being studied. Compared with mostly text-based data collected by netnography and virtual ethnography, the details of participants’ experience, in the form of words, images, or audio/video files are collected by digital ethnography. The various types of data enable the researchers to conduct deep and richer analyses (Masten and Plowman 2003).

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

**Table 2: Comparison of Online Ethnographic Methods**

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


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern about Privacy</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Source: Authors’ classification based on research reviewed

**Overview of the Four Approaches**

The evolution of online consumption spaces offers the opportunities to advance the online ethnographic methodology in several aspects such as the removal of spatial and temporal boundaries, lower cost of data collection as data is often stored in online repositories, easier access to online communications. The challenges of studying online consumption, however, have not disappeared and may multiply with the transition to Web 3.0 and the rapid globalization – especially via mobile devices – of the internet. As discussed above, with the blurring boundaries between the social and the technique, the real and the virtual world, the assumption of “pure-form ethnography” is arguable at best. If the future development of web will ultimately turn human beings into cyborgs, or if technology will create sentient machines, the question arises whether we are observing the real culture of this (human?) society or just our imagination of ‘the other’, who might be a cyborg in front of the screen. With the online and offline life increasingly combining and inter-blending, some online ethnographic methods such as netnography and virtual netnography appear to have narrow focus on online interactions about offline lives; and cannot capture the full and rich detail of the emergent Web 3.0 consumer experience. Data collections by netnography and virtual ethnography are limited to text based data, which also is problematic when people are increasingly getting into the graphic based virtual worlds and ubiquitous computing environment of Web 2.0 – a trend that Web 3.0 would intensify. Online ethnographic methods have been applied to online communities and culture for over a decade and, along the way, different researchers have used different terms (e.g., netnography, virtual
ethnography, digital ethnography, webnography, webservation) to describe their research. As Kozinets (2010) argues that if these terms signal something significantly different, then different terms may be needed; but if all these terms signal same things, then the proliferation of terminology leads to needless confusions.

**New Directions for Online Ethnographic Methods**

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

**Research Questions and Method Selection**

As Sunderland and Denny (2007) contend, “the methodologies employed, whether participant observation, focus groups, in-depth interviews, diaries (online or offline), village censuses, surveys, or maps, “are not ‘ethnographic’ per se, but…are made so by the intellectual framing of the task”. In future studies, it is crucial for researchers to understand the relationship between research question at hand and method and choose the ethnographic or other approaches accordingly (Sunderland and Denny 2003). Boellstorff (2010) classifies three research questions regarding virtual world in Web 2.0: (1) interface between virtual world and actual world, (2) interface between virtual words and another virtual world, and (3) single virtual world. Accordingly, researchers need to focus on combined online/offline context for research question type 1, and online contexts for research questions 2 and 3. If a researcher would like to study the
consumer culture in Second Life, he or she should study the connection between actual consumer behaviors and consumer behavior in that virtual world to get meaningful results.

**Digital Based Online Ethnographic Methodology**

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

**Digital Ethnography as Umbrella Terminology**

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

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

**Summary and Concluding Observations**

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

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


Founded in 1892, the University of Rhode Island is one of eight land, urban, and sea grant universities in the United States. The 1,200-acre rural campus is less than ten miles from Narragansett Bay and highlights its traditions of natural resource, marine and urban related research. There are over 14,000 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in seven degree-granting colleges representing 48 states and the District of Columbia. More than 500 international students represent 59 different countries. Eighteen percent of the freshman class graduated in the top ten percent of their high school classes. The teaching and research faculty numbers over 600 and the University offers 101 undergraduate programs and 86 advanced degree programs. URI students have received Rhodes, Fulbright, Truman, Goldwater, and Udall scholarships. There are over 80,000 active alumnae.

The University of Rhode Island started to offer undergraduate business administration courses in 1923. In 1962, the MBA program was introduced and the PhD program began in the mid 1980s. The College of Business Administration is accredited by The AACSB International - The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business in 1969. The College of Business enrolls over 1400 undergraduate students and more than 300 graduate students.

**Mission**

Our responsibility is to provide strong academic programs that instill excellence, confidence and strong leadership skills in our graduates. Our aim is to (1) promote critical and independent thinking, (2) foster personal responsibility and (3) develop students whose performance and commitment mark them as leaders contributing to the business community and society. The College will serve as a center for business scholarship, creative research and outreach activities to the citizens and institutions of the State of Rhode Island as well as the regional, national and international communities.

The creation of this working paper series has been funded by an endowment established by William A. Orme, URI College of Business Administration, Class of 1949 and former head of the General Electric Foundation. This working paper series is intended to permit faculty members to obtain feedback on research activities before the research is submitted to academic and professional journals and professional associations for presentations.

An award is presented annually for the most outstanding paper submitted.