NETNOGRAPHY EVOLVED: NEW CONTEXTS, SCOPE, PROCEDURES AND SENSIBILITIES

ABSTRACT

Netnography is an ever-evolving qualitative digital research method that has been used and advanced by tourism researchers to understand a broad spectrum of topics. Developments such as artificial intelligence and emerging cultural phenomena offer new opportunities for tourism netnographers but require procedural adjustments. This paper updates, applies, and explains how contemporary netnographers collect digital traces and diverse user experiences while following and adapting the method's foundational steps, movements, and operations. Expanding the field of touristic inquiry using netnography to new sites, data, and experience types, balancing rigor and adaptability, emphasizing engagement, ethics, empathy, and immersion, and elaborating the interpretation of different data collection modalities, this paper provides a novel and cutting-edge guide for applying netnography in contemporary tourism research.

INTRODUCTION

Netnography is defined as a qualitative research approach for gaining cultural understanding that involves the systematic, immersive, and multimodal use of observations, digital traces, and/or elicitations. It is based on a set of guidelines combined with flexible procedures that emphasize researcher engagement, ethical considerations, and contextualization (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2022).

Over the past three decades, netnography has differentiated itself from related approaches, such as virtual ethnography and digital ethnography. Virtual and digital ethnography emphasize philosophical guidelines for adapting ethnography to non-physical environments, offer few and general procedures, and are infrequently updated for changing times. In contrast, netnography provides a large set of specific and detailed operational and ethical guidelines with step-by-step choices, and its procedures are continually being updated for evolving technological and cultural realities, including the introduction of new platforms and tools, such as artificial intelligence (or AI, see Kozinets, 2020s; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023).

Tourism, both as an activity and a field of academic inquiry, holds a unique position in the social sciences. At its heart, tourism is about experiences—ones that are transient, multi-sensory, and deeply subjective. It is a pursuit where individuals actively seek novelty, difference, and often, a deeper connection to places, cultures, and histories outside their everyday lives. As a field of academic inquiry, tourism studies aims to understand these experiences, the motives driving them, and their broader sociocultural and economic implications.

In attempting to capture and understand the richness of tourism experiences and their impacts, traditional research methods often come up against limitations. Surveys and structured interviews, for instance, can collect demographic profiles and capture what tourists say about their actions, motivations, and satisfactions. However, they often fall short in depicting actual behaviors or grasping the emotional, resonant, imaginative, cultural, and serendipitous moments that define tourism. Exploring the complications of participant observation with tourists, Frohlick and Harrison (2008, p. 5) note many challenges, including the researcher's potential

influence on the study, and the difficulty of studying the situational and transitory identities involved in tourism. Benjamin and Laughter (2022) further point to the often endarkened narratives of marginalized tourism stakeholders that require unconventional techniques to be uncovered.

Netnography offers a unique window into the real-time, unfiltered narratives of tourists and tourism stakeholders by serving as a bridge that connects digitally derived data with qualitative academic inquiry (Xu & Wu, 2018). Modern tourists and stakeholders have a penchant for sharing experiences and opinions online—be it through textual or visual posts. In their relatively recent systematic review of netnography research in tourism, Tavakoli and Wijesinghe (2019) identified the *Annals of Tourism Research* as the leading journal in which tourism netnographies are published. A search on the journal website reveals a great variety of papers that used netnography, ranging from early inquiries into shared travel videos (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009), migrant relationships and tourism employment (Janta et al., 2011) and tourists' authenticity quests (Mkono, 2013) to recent investigations of Airbnb use by tourists with impairments (Randle & Dolnicar, 2019), Chinese anime pilgrims (Liu, Lai & Li, 2022) and travel picture authenticity (Zhou, Lu & Wang, 2023), among other topics.

This broad spectrum of topics dealt with by tourism netnographers highlights that netnography is not just about the study of technology use or technoculture. It is a tool for cultural understanding that leverages digital communication, but it can be used to study almost any topic, as long as it can be explored through digital traces, online events, or immersive opportunities. Comparatively speaking, what makes tourism distinctively suited for netnographic exploration, as opposed to other fields, is its inherent experiential nature, the centrality of discourse among stakeholders, its global and multicultural nature, its reliance on technology, and the temporal and spatial dynamism of its contexts. By leveraging flows of digitally derived data to produce in-depth, contextual, and empathetic cultural understanding, netnography allows researchers to generate valuable insights into the norms, trends, and shifts that continuously shape the tourism landscape.

Tourism researchers have not only applied but also critically advanced netnography's guiding principles and procedures (e.g., Mkono, Ruhanen & Markwell, 2015; Lugosi & Quinton, 2018; Jeffrey, Ashraf & Paris, 2022). However, a survey of extant literature reveals notable inconsistencies in netnography's application. Although contemporary netnography has transcended its early focus on online communities, a sizable portion of recent tourism studies remain anchored to older versions of netnography. Few tourism netnographies recognize its updated capacity to engage with both immersive experiences and AI-augmented interactions.

There is also a palpable confusion between netnography and content analysis. Content analysis emerges from a positivist perspective and operates under the presumption that digital content can be detached from its context and dissected into predefined categories. The approach is reductionist: it reduces complex narratives and interactions into more manageable, and often numerical, representations. Netnography, on the other hand, emerges from interpretivist paradigms and emphasizes a holistic contextual understanding of meanings, symbols, and shared understandings. Although both can be used to analyze online posts, their assumptions and outcomes are very different.

This paper advances the practice of tourism netnography, incorporating novel concepts and updated procedures. Thoroughly explaining an expanding terrain that includes immersive technologies, smart devices, and artificial intelligence, we demonstrate contemporary netnography's role as a crucial instrument in the tourism researcher's toolbox. The paper illuminates the methodological rigor, ethical considerations, and analytical depth of netnography, revealing its capacity to dissect a variety of complex, dynamic tourism phenomena and the many forces that affect them. It does so by discussing netnography's evolving contexts, scope, procedures and sensibilities, and their implications for netnography's application and continuous development in tourism.

THE EVOLVING CONTEXTS FOR NETNOGRAPHY IN TOURISM RESEARCH

The landscape of tourism research is facing seismic shifts driven by the relentless evolution of technology. In the post-pandemic era, the proliferation of devices, apps, and diverse digital interfaces and the increased digitalization of tourism organizations, exchanges and experiences has magnified the digital footprint of tourism (Gretzel et al., 2020). This technological surge is not just altering the nature of data but also introducing novel touristic experiences, from destination-oriented virtual cooking classes (Zhu & Cheng, 2022) to air travel-related digital activism (Mkono, 2020). As physical and digital tourism blur, research in the field faces the imperative to adapt, grappling with data abundance, capturing the nuances of experiences, the increasing but often opaque impacts of algorithms, and navigating the complex terrain of ethics. This section outlines this evolving landscape and addresses how netnography co-evolves to suit it.

Increasing technology mediation in tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated and expanded the role of technological intermediation in human society, with tourism being one of the most severely affected areas (Yang, Zhang, and Rickly, 2021). When global travel confronted unprecedented constraints on tourist mobility and tourism-dependent livelihoods, digital tools and platforms played a critical role in bridging gaps and reshaping the terrain of tourist behaviors and experiences (Yu et al. 2023). As Zenker and Kock (2020), and numerous others, have outlined, tourism research followed these major shifts. Technology use not only facilitated the continuity of tourism research during lockdowns, but it also shifted research interests to new, technology-mediated tourism-related phenomena. Netnographies of tourist experience during the pandemic (Girija, Sharma, & Kaushal, 2022), COVID-19 misinformation (Tiani & Mazida 2021), the role of outdoor tourism on mental health (Buckley & Westaway, 2020), experiences of event cancellations (Brooks & Soulard, 2022), the use of Pinterest to dream about travel during lockdowns (Gretzel, 2021), and solidarity through co-creation (Johnson & Buhalis, 2022) are examples of research that took advantage of pandemic-fueled digital traces to explore emerging research gaps.

The digital ecosystem around tourism has diversified and expanded at unprecedented rates. The integration of sophisticated technologies, like artificial intelligence, has given rise to applications capable of real-time translations, itinerary optimizations, and personalized travel recommendations (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2023). Simultaneously, the dawning of the Metaverse presents the potential for revolutionary forms of virtual tourism experiences (Buhalis, Leung &

Lin, 2023). With each interaction on these advanced platforms, users inevitably leave behind digital footprints.

Changes in the digital landscape not only increase the traces available, but also the types of interfaces through which users engage. Digital interfaces grow increasingly intuitive, immersive, and responsive to human senses, blurring the line between the digital and physical realms. They also often blur the line between the public and the private, which demands more diligent and context-specific applications of ethical principles to tourism netnographies. Not only are digital traces produced by ever younger users but also by a larger proportion of older users, neurodiverse users and remote, hypermobile, displaced, or unhoused users. While this creates opportunities for underrepresented voices to be heard in tourism research, the vulnerabilities of some of these users call for a more explicit ethics of care. Bots and other non-human users might create noise that can drown out important voices. Last, but not least, new applications and interfaces change the context in which the creation of tourism-related digital traces occurs, which can have significant impacts on their nature (Mariani, Borghi & Gretzel, 2019). This emphasizes the need for contextualized interpretation in netnographic research.

Different types of tourism experience and phenomena

Tourism has been reconfigured by "technoculture," a situation in which identities, behaviors, and meanings shape and are deeply influenced by technology use (Kozinets, 2020a). Influencers, chatbots, augmented reality, virtual reality, and deep fakes are some of the most important technoculturally led changes within the world of tourism. Digital activism in tourism, another manifestation of technoculture, leverages digital platforms for causes and movements (Mkono 2018). The pandemic-accelerated trend of blurring lines between work, leisure, and tourism highlights another facet of technoculture: the dissolution of conventional boundaries. The growing number of 'work-tourists' or 'digital nomads', representing individuals who harmonize professional obligations with travel aspirations, epitomizes the flexible and integrated ethos of the digital age (Hannonen, 2020). Locals acting as tour guides with the help of sharing economy platforms is another example of a boundary-blurring technocultural trend (Atsız, & Seyitoğlu, 2023).

The challenges faced by tourism research within this new landscape are manifold. Researchers are awash in an unprecedented deluge of raw information, which not only varies immensely in form but also may require new approaches to analysis and interpretation. Many new and immersive technocultural phenomena such as virtual reality and the Metaverse emphasize the experiential facet of tourism, an aspect whose subjective and reflective quality, introspective elements, and need for empathy and nuance render it too multidimensional and complex for quantitative tools.

Facing this challenge requires tourism researchers to strike a delicate balance between the need for rigorous empirical analysis and the necessity for understanding subjectively powerful personal experiences. Additionally, the increasing integration of technology in tourism research presents various ethical conundrums, such as the need for data privacy and appropriate representation of vulnerable populations or sensitive topics encountered online. Netnography has a long history of addressing some of these issues as an integral part of its procedures but needs to

keep evolving to successfully assist tourism researchers in their endeavors to understand and embrace new technological realities and emerging technocultural phenomena.

THE EVOLVING SCOPE OF NETNOGRAPHY

Alongside expanding tourism research contexts to which netnography can be applied, the scope of netnography is also evolving. In this section, we will consider the expanding sphere for the conduct of netnography, demonstrating how it encompasses—and can continue to accommodate—numerous new opportunities for tourism research by remaining open to new varieties of platforms, digital traces, technocultural experiences, and devices.

Expanding Scope of Platforms/Applications

The world of digitally mediated communication and experience has transformed dramatically since netnography's early days of forums, newsgroups, and bulletin boards, expanding to encompass a plethora of global social media platforms. Consequently, netnography evolved from a narrow focus on online communities to consider the digital traces left on social media platforms and blogs to be its main source of data. For netnographic research purposes, social media has been broadly defined to "encompass sites, applications, and tools that permit users, even those who lack technical expertise, to connect with other users, create content, and circulate it" (Kozinets 2020a, 4). Clearly, large social media platforms continue to be important to the conduct of netnography. Whether netnographies draw data from TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn, or use newer offerings such as Discord, Parler, Threads, Lemon8, and Mastodon, social media is often a critical source of data for building cultural understanding.

Besides specific social media platforms and applications, netnography's scope also embraces the fast-growing reputation economy in tourism and its digital traces in the form of online reviews. The important opportunity for tourist netnographies lies in exploiting the richness of data on specialized review sites like Tripadvisor and Yelp, on online travel agency sites like Booking.com and Expedia, on sharing economy platforms like Airbnb and Withlocals, and on tourism provider websites. Many tourism netnographies have taken advantage of this expanding universe of review content and continue to exploit online reviews as sources of data.

Netnographies of online reviews can also shed light onto the practice of review-writing. The use of netnographic methods encourages a broader view of reviews as embedded in linguistic and social systems and as expressing diverse motives and practices. For example, Kozinets (2016, 836) studied Amazon reviews, finding that not only are they used to inform purchase decisions, but they also act as "a platform for cultural connection, witty repartee, social commentary, entertainment, personal revelation, self-promotion, revenge seeking, and many other activities". Deeper investigations of these social communication elements of reviews could usefully be studied in tourism contexts.

Netnography's broad definition of social media means that netnographers' hunt for digital traces can cover a broad spectrum of sites on which user-generated content appears. For example, the comment sections of online publications such as newspapers and magazines are rich sources. In a recent scan of *The New York Times* travel section, we found several travel-related articles with many comments. An article about American tourists in Europe trying to beat the Summer 2023

heat wave garnered 376 textual comments (Yeginsu 2023). Many of these comments were detailed, lengthy, well-written and contained rich personal disclosures. Comment sections are commonly embedded in online publications and can provide a range of insights that can be usefully interpreted in tourism netnographies.

However, the scope of digital phenomena of interest to researchers transcends what can be found in user-generated digital traces on social media. Thus, contemporary forms of netnography increasingly adapt to encapsulate a vast array of "technocultural experiences" (Kozinets 2020a), accommodating a reality where digital and cultural phenomena seamlessly intertwine. Central to this evolution is the development of immersive netnography (Kozinets 2023, 109), defined as "a specific set of data collection, analysis, ethical, and representational research practices that apply to a wide range of digital media phenomena, including immersive technology experiences such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and the Metaverse". Tourism researchers have been at the forefront of this evolution of netnography, as Tavakoli and Mura's (2015) immersive study of Iranian Muslim women's behavior in virtual tourist destinations attests. The emergence of live-streaming platforms like Twitch with their specific affordances and variety of travel-related content (Deng, Benckendorff & Wang, 2022) is another example of expanding technocultural experiences that have attracted the attention of tourism netnographers.

AI Content Proliferation

The proliferation of AI-generated content, from chatbot interactions to virtual assistant dialogues, poses intriguing challenges and opportunities. This surge in non-human content might be perceived as a potential dilution of the authentic, human-generated narratives that have traditionally been the bedrock of ethnographic studies. Distinguishing between these voices may be crucial for methodological robustness and also for ethical considerations. Initiatives like watermarking AI-produced content can emerge as potential solutions, but these solutions seem frustratingly unlikely.

Methods such as social media monitoring and dashboard type approaches that use large amounts of online data to construct a sense of average sentiment or opinion are especially vulnerable to being overwhelmed by the deluge of artificially generated posts. However, netnography is focused on locating and evaluating small amounts of highly relevant and culturally complex information using human-centered skillsets. As such, it is a much more resilient method when facing a rising tide of AI-generated content.

Furthermore, netnography embraces holistic digital contexts. As such, it can offer a window into the evolving digital ecosystem where human and machine voices coalesce and intermingle in a complex and dynamic technocultural milieu. In this evolving digital multiverse, "more-than-human netnography methods" (Lugosi & Quinton 2018) becomes imperative. These methods not only recognize the increasing confluence of human and AI voices but also appreciate their intertwinement in online cultures. Far from being mere noise, AI-generated content can offer insights into human-machine dynamics, aspirations towards AI interactions, and the broader societal implications of an increasingly automated digital realm.

Figure 1 summarizes this evolution of netnography from its online community-focused origins and embrace of social media data sources to its recent branching out to immersive data sites and interactions with nonhuman actors. The expanding scope of data sources means that there is an ever-greater amount of digital traces, online events, and experiential opportunities available to netnographers. This broadened scope also increases the diversity of the types of digital traces, online events, and experiential opportunities and requires modified data collection strategies and analysis techniques.
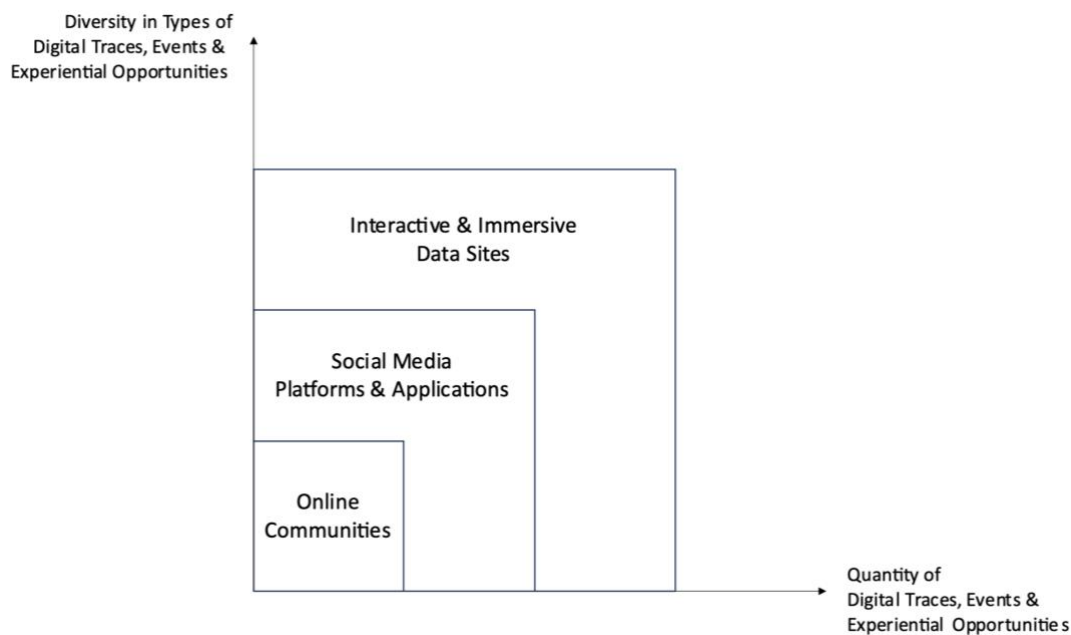

Figure 1. The Evolving Scope of Data Sites for Netnography

Varying types of digital traces

New visual and video platforms have emerged as rich sources of tourism research insight that require special adaptation of netnographic methods. For example, Jeffrey et al. (2022) studied Snapchat usage with interviews and retrospective prompts, while Smith et al. (2023) adapted visual interpretation methods to study gendered representations of the aviation industry on Instagram. Netnographies are highly attuned to context and, thus, noting and adjusting to unique platform qualities can be important to these investigations. Gretzel's (2021) study of visual tourist fantasies provides an example of how to do so in its exploration of the Pinterest platform's unique algorithmic features.

Visual data presents a broad array of research opportunities that are still largely untapped by tourism researchers. For example, looking for images using a visual search engine like Bing or Google Images can yield a treasure trove of visual data related to a specific research topic or question. In the nursing context, Eriksson et al. (2014) used Google Images to find images of nursing related tattoos, and then visually analyzed them for the meanings they conveyed about the profession. We can envision similar types of studies in tourism that might search for images

of tourism workers, travelling with pets or children, or destination related landscapes, tattoos, or souvenirs.

The challenge of analyzing still images, video, and audio files may require tourism researchers to develop skills that are different from textual interpretation—and perhaps to adopt new AI assistants for additional insight. Additionally, these traces occur together in complex online contexts that include titles, fonts, color schemes, avatar skins, image sizes, reels, profile descriptions, numbers of followers, and other information and arrangements. Netnographers who learn to methodically combine visual, video, textual, and other interpretive skills, and to consider each post as produced in and for a specific cultural context, will find their research gaining richness and depth.

Diverse Devices

Originally, netnography used desktop and laptop computers to study online forums. Traditional computers remain important to netnography, but in many cases have been replaced by smartphones whose portability provided data collection with a new on-the-go quality, including the opportunity to leverage them in interviews and conduct mobile ethnographies. Immersive technology interfaces, like virtual reality goggles, can transport netnographers into new experiences, offering blends of observed behavior and embodied sensations. Smartwatches provide researchers with insights into intimate micro-moments and health-related behaviors. Then there are surprising new contenders: smart home systems and connected cars, which blur the lines between online and offline, making the user's environment an ongoing part of the digital narrative and placing the netnographer physically inside a technocultural experience. Tourism netnographers today have a wide variety of new devices to explore and utilize. To take full advantage of these opportunities, they must be on top of the evolving procedures that underpin netnography, which form the focus of our paper's next section.

EVOLVING PROCEDURES IN NETNOGRAPHY

Netnography follows ethnographic traditions but is continuously adapted to keep pace with rapid changes in the digital world. As a consequence, netnography is a novel approach that adapts to new platforms, e.g., Snapchat (Jeffrey et al., 2022) and WhatsApp (Rambe, Mkono & Meda, 2023), emerging digital traces like wearable data (Greshake Tzovaras et al., 2021), new devices such as smart speakers (Kowalczuk, 2018), and recent phenomena like interactions with virtual influencers (Xie-Carson, Benckendorff, & Hughes, 2023), sharing economy platform-mediated services (Atsız & Seyitoğlu, 2023), and gamified travel experiences, e.g., escape rooms (Kolar, 2017). Rigorously harnessing these research opportunities requires tourism researchers to understand the foundations of netnography, be well-versed in its most recent forms, and keep adapting netnographic procedures as necessary and appropriate.

While Whalen (2018, 3423) refers to it as a "shifting methodology" and Gambetti and Kozinets (2022, 3) describe the "unlimited adaptive potential of netnography", there are certain immutable principles that delineate netnography and make it distinctive from other approaches. This section delves into netnography's anthropological foundation and the rigor of its foundational movements.

Netnography's foundations

Historically, anthropologist ethnographers physically embedded themselves within their chosen cultural milieus, living in these "fieldsites", and championing a hands-on, researcher-as-instrument, immersion-based approach. Their embodied onsite presence was their participation in the culture, and it gave them access to an insider's understanding. However, presence and participation in ethnographic fieldsites was never a completely straightforward matter. Tourism ethnographers thus traverse a complex physical domain that spans a range of experiences, dealing with the challenges of dispersion, indeterminacy, contact zones, and representativeness (Frohlick & Harrison, 2008). As tourism experiences increasingly involve technology, tourists might use online resources before, during, and after their travels, and, as explained above, usage can span many platforms, devices, experiences, and types of interaction. While staying true to core principles of ethnography, the development of netnography must accommodate these changes.

Netnography's stages and movements

To better meet these dynamic contingencies and methodological challenges, netnography has matured from a mere application of ethnography to study online communities into a unique, nuanced, and systematic human-centered approach for conducting qualitative research on a range of digital platforms and experiences. Central to netnography's methodology are four foundational stages (see Figure 2): research focus, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and research communication. These stages are sequential, but they can overlap and might require several iterations. They contain six iterative and dynamic movements:

1. initiation, which focuses the research on a topic/phenomenon or question and builds the foundations for subsequent data collection operations (e.g., seeking ethics approval);
2. immersion, a process of experiencing, observing, reflecting and recording;
3. investigation, centered on gleaning pre-existing digital imprints and encompassing search, discovery, and selective collection of digital traces;
4. interaction, involving data elicitation;
5. integration, where analysis meets interpretation; and
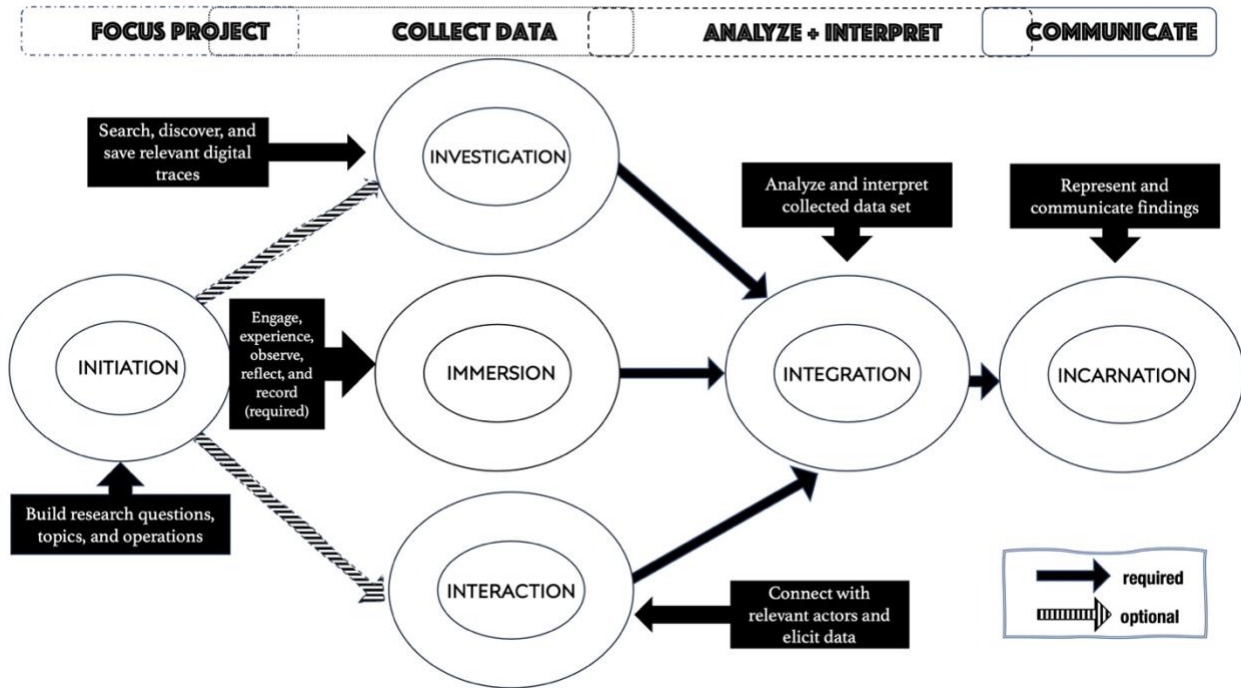6. incarnation, the act of representing and communicating findings.

Figure 2: Netnography's Procedures: Stages and Movements

Immersion is a mandatory movement. Investigation is often used, and interaction may also be used, as required to answer the research question, making them complementary movements in relation to immersion. Embedded in each of these movements are sets of explicit operations that guide netnographers through nuanced activities (Kozinets, 2020a). Examples of operations include choosing a virtual world to research, converting research questions into an online interview guide, and constructing a research webpage. These operations can be called upon, adapted, synthesized, or ignored as needed. Netnography's stages and movements thus provide a structure that balances being systematic, rule-bound, and rigorous with significant flexibility to adapt the method to changing circumstances.

As the ability to customize indicates, each netnography will be tailor-made by the researcher to fit its context. If a netnographer wants to study the travel review use of a particular group of tourists, say middle-aged Australian women who plan travel for their families, it might make sense to begin with the interaction movement to ensure these women are reached. This could involve interviewing these women first, to establish their habits before engaging in the collection of digital traces. Then, the netnography could move to the investigation and immersion movements, collecting digital traces from some of the specific travel review sites the interviewed women identified. If the research question concerns the types of discourses flowing through a particular travel review site, that study may not involve any interactive data collection, but could move directly to immersion and investigation.

Similarly, some research questions can best be answered through auto-netnographies (Coombes & Jones, 2020), meaning they collect data exclusively through immersion. Sensitive contexts, such as darknet sites and vulnerable populations, require ethical adaptations of the movements and might involve more extensive initiation and immersion movements. The unique skills and

research orientations of the researchers, their chosen field, and the intended research output will further shape the conduct of the netnography. In this way, each netnography is emergent, ethically attuned, and uniquely adapted to its research context.

From participant observation to active engagement

In netnography, including tourism netnographies (Gewinner, 2023), the balance has leaned towards capturing authentic digital expressions without disrupting the online ecosystem with overt posts and visible public conversations. This research reticence comes with a risk—pure observation might only skim the surface and fail to unearth deeper cultural insights. However, it also means something different to 'participate' in a multi-faceted digital space than it does to participate, say, as a member of a neighborhood. The traditional ethos of ethnography—rooted in direct participation in a cultural context—may therefore not always translate seamlessly when those contexts are digital.

The tension regarding how involved a netnographer should be — from passive observation to interpersonal interaction — is exemplified by Tomej, Hansen and Blichfeldt's (2023) study of the travel information needs of dementia caregivers. They label their approach a "passive netnography" and emphasize that they "did not engage in interactions with the users and observed discussions covertly" (p.4). Yet, they examined four online forums and kept "an extensive journal capturing [the netnographers'] general thoughts and impressions from observations". The results yielded profound insights into the travel struggles of people with dementia and their caregivers.

As this example indicates, replacing the confusing terms of passivity, participation, and observation with more specific labels leads to more methodological clarity. The concept of 'active engagement' offers a more nuanced perspective, reflecting a researcher's deliberate involvement with digital experiences, traces, and platforms (Kozinets 2020a). In netnography, active engagement encompasses a spectrum from complete nonparticipation, as a silent observer, to full immersion and interaction with other people, avatars, bots, or virtual spaces. The concept of active engagement in netnography emphasizes the centrality of the researcher while nuancing a spectrum of potential engagement activities. Although not a comprehensive listing, some key active engagement strategies in netnography include intellectual, cultural, historical, emotional, and social engagement. Contemporary netnography does not just recommend engagement, it *requires* it. For, at its core, the essence of ethnographic participation is reincarnated in netnography through immersion.

Immersion and the immersion journal

At the heart of netnography lies immersion in data sites. The variety and complexity of today's digital experiences complicates the traditional notion of a 'field site', transforming it into a series of data sites with potentially rich sources of digital traces, information, and experiences. Consider how the data sites relative to tourism research have become expansive, evolving, elusive, and entangled. Interwoven throughout every element of their travel journeys, tourists deploy multiple online platforms and devices for different purposes and on different occasions.

Kozinets, R. V., & Gretzel, U. (2023). Netnography evolved: New contexts, scope, procedures and sensibilities. *Annals of Tourism Research*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103693.

Some, like Snapchat, may be private, necessitating novel approaches to gain access or build understanding (Jeffrey et al., 2022).

Paralleling the dissolution of traditional physical 'field' sites in cultural digital research is the rupture of the concept of 'field' notes. First, digital experiences and digital traces are widely accessible, and collecting them all may lead to rapid overload. A new method must encourage a more focused perspective. Second, rather than envisioning researchers as explorers of an external and stable locale, it seems more fitting to view them as the hub of a network of research activities. The netnographer defines the boundaries of data collection and thus delineates the research field around chosen questions, sites, devices, experiences, and so forth. Third, to be a rigorous method and not a purely impressionistic enterprise, the choices and the contexts made during immersion require systematic recording and effective organization. The practice of immersion journaling (Kozinets, 2020a), rather than 'field' noting, reinterprets the practice by decoupling it from a particular field or specific site. As the locus of netnography becomes broader, and the focus shifts to active engagement, fieldnotes transform into immersion journal entries.

The journal accounts for time spent and activities performed while experiencing, observing, and searching for digital traces. Not all digital experiences, observations, or set of traces will be worth saving. They may, for instance, not be relevant to the research question or may not contain vibrant symbolism, personal reflection, and explanatory rich representation. The immersion journal provides a way to overview digital experiences and traces encountered in the research process without having to collect it all as data. For example, there may be numerous individual data points which are not very rich, but the overall picture is interesting and deserves recognition and summarization. The immersion journal thus acts as a type of filtering mechanism, allowing the digital researcher to experience a lot, but save only a fraction of it.

The immersion journal can also serve to capture the contours of ethically sensitive material without actually saving that material directly. For instance, a virtual world netnographer may overhear offensive misogynistic or racially charged discussions in the course of the research. These discussions can be overviewed in the immersion journal without providing specific names or precise locations. While direct recording and sharing of these conversations would be fraught with ethical problems, their general recounting in the immersion journal is not, because the data cannot be traced to actual individuals. However, the experiences and observations are captured in an overview sense by the researcher in the journal and become usable data. Similarly, the immersion journal may offer a way to handle topics or data that are very sensitive or where the researcher or site needs protection.

Procedurally, immersion journal entries are to be kept in a file separated from collected investigative data or recorded interactive data. The immersion journal encourages, captures, and reflects upon the netnographer's active engagement. Writing in the journal becomes a way to record the core action of the immersion movement, which is exploring, undertaking a digital journey. It both encourages and captures the researcher-as-instrument stance of contemplation. The immersion journal functions as both a compass and a cartographer's sketchpad. Journal entries will record relevant signposts, aiding future navigation and guiding the netnographer through digital landscapes.

Saul Steinberg's iconic illustration, "View of the World from 9th Avenue," exemplifies the profound representational potential of mapmaking. At first glance, Steinberg's work may appear as a humorous nod to New Yorkers' sometimes myopic perspective of the world, with Manhattan's 9th and 10th Avenues prominently detailed while distant lands are rendered as mere afterthoughts. However, diving deeper, this illustration underscores the subjectivity inherent in all representations. Just as Steinberg's map filters the world through the conceptual lens of a New Yorker, the immersion journal may contain curated maps of the netnographer's journey that are shaped by their various frames of reference. Both Steinberg's work and the immersion journal underscore the crucial understanding that representation, whether of physical spaces, digital places, or technological experiences, is not a neutral act but a creative, interpretive, and sometimes deeply personal endeavor.

Moreover, if published or shared in part or in whole, the netnographic immersion journal can provide methodological transparency, illustrating the researcher's immersion process, and allowing others to retrace the steps, decisions, and depth of engagement. In team netnographies, which have become the norm, sharing immersion journals contributes to methodological transparency and rigor. Enhanced levels of effectiveness, reflexivity, and transparency bolster the research's credibility and encourage researchers to continuously scrutinize their biases, assumptions, and influences. Purely immersive approaches, called auto-netnographies (Howard 2020; Tavakoli, 2016), rely entirely on the immersion journal.

Thus far, only a handful of tourism researchers have reported adopting the immersion journal as part of their netnographic repertoire, but the practice is definitely growing (e.g., Gretzel (2021, 259; Kennedy-Eden and Gretzel, 2021, 336; Lever, Elliot, and Joppe, 2021, 441; Tomej et al., 2023). Currently, immersion journal entries are rarely, if ever, credited or quoted in published netnography research. For all of the reasons listed in this section, we believe that future netnographies will be strengthened by greater use of immersion journals and their excerpts being featured in publications.

EVOLVING SENSIBILITIES: COLLECTING, ANALYZING, AND INTERPRETING DIFFERENT TYPES OF NETNOGRAPHIC DATA

Data collection in netnography proceeds from a basis of researcher engagement. As explained in a prior section, this engagement can assume various forms, including intellectual, emotional, historical, cultural, and social. It also results from a careful consideration of research ethics that accounts for specific characteristics of the context, such as whether it is sensitive or involves vulnerable populations, and the research results, which might require special attention to privacy and confidentiality concerns.

In netnography, data is considered to be informational raw materials—such as digital traces, personal observations of technology use experiences, or responses to interview questions—that are selectively chosen to become part of a research project. The immersion, investigation, and interaction movements set conditions that lead to the three distinct types of data in netnography: immersive, investigative, and interactive data. Each type of data can illuminate distinct facets of the cultural understanding the netnographer seeks. Across all three modalities, the goal of netnographic research is to collect 'deep' data, which is considered relatively rare. Distinguishing

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deep data can be confusing to those new to netnography. It relies on a subjective interpretation by the researcher in the act of collection and reflection, during which the potential source of data seems more significant at revealing a variety of rich cultural understandings related to the research question than other information that has been encountered. This focus on deep data distinguishes netnography from approaches that seek to derive general patterns from large amounts of digital traces (Kozinets, 2020b).

Collecting netnographic data

As noted previously, immersive data is captured in an immersion journal that chronicles, maps, reflects, and extends the netnographer's experience of their digital research journey. In contrast, investigative data is composed of various types of rich and resonant online traces such as textual posts and comments, numerical likes and shares, photos, images, video, sound recordings, avatar skins, and much else. Investigative data's richness reveals a cultural reality composed of broader narratives, meanings, and relationships. Finally, interactive data is the result of a dialogue with social actors relevant to the research inquiry. This data enables the netnographer to explore specific themes, illuminate nuanced perspectives, and cross-examine emergent interpretations. Whether the netnography only collects immersive data or combines it with other data types, all data collection efforts are informed by the netnographer's active engagement with the research context and careful ethical considerations.

Figure 3 presents a new and comprehensive view of the netnographic research process that elaborates the role of the three data collection movements and develops their actions, data types, and analytic and interpretive modalities. Each netnographer or team will engage with different digital traces, events, and experiential opportunities (for example, inhabiting a virtual world, using a robot, or wearing a biometric geolocation device). From that engagement, each netnographer or team will seek out deep data and use it to better comprehend the (techno)cultural world we live in. However, the process that takes a netnographer from researcher engagement to deep data to cultural understanding is complex. Research rigor requires careful attention to process, origin, role, and type of data being utilized.
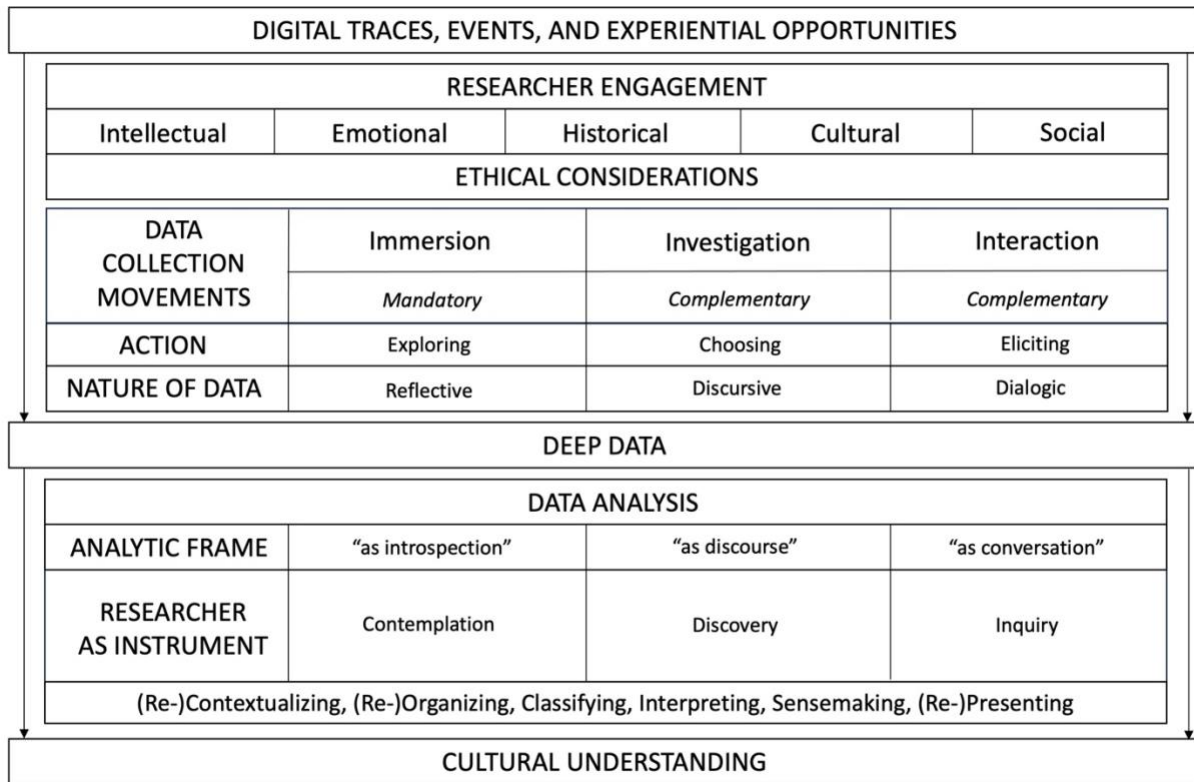
DIGITAL TRACES, EVENTS, AND EXPERIENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES				
RESEARCHER ENGAGEMENT				
Intellectual	Emotional	Historical	Cultural	Social
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS				
DATA COLLECTION MOVEMENTS	Immersion		Investigation	Interaction
	Mandatory		*Complementary*	*Complementary*
ACTION	Exploring		Choosing	Eliciting
NATURE OF DATA	Reflective		Discursive	Dialogic
DEEP DATA				
DATA ANALYSIS				
ANALYTIC FRAME	"as introspection"		"as discourse"	"as conversation"
RESEARCHER AS INSTRUMENT	Contemplation		Discovery	Inquiry
(Re-)Contextualizing, (Re-)Organizing, Classifying, Interpreting, Sensemaking, (Re-)Presenting				
CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING				

Figure 3: Data Collection and Analysis in the Netnographic Research Process

Immersive data: Analysis and interpretation

To ensure culturally significant and human-centered research engagement, immersing and creating immersion journal entries are mandatory for all netnographers. The core action of immersed netnographers is *exploring* the phenomenon through sustained and focused engagement with relevant traces, experiences, events, and actors. The nature of this data is *reflective*, and the researcher-as-instrument stance invokes *introspection*. Immersive data captures cultural reality but also reflects the researcher's perspective, positionality, knowledge, expertise, interests, and evolving understanding. Immersive data shares this reflective quality with traditional ethnographic fieldnotes.

Recognizing that immersive data stems from introspection may challenge traditional notions of subjectivity and objectivity in research. Levy (1996) contends that introspection is intrinsic to all research, whether it is masked by scientific rules or openly acknowledged or not. However, Levy warns against extreme introspection, which can lead to solipsism, negating the existence of an objective external reality. Ameliorating this concern somewhat, most netnographies will combine immersive data with investigative and/or interactive data, leveraging the strengths of each technique in the process of triangulation (Denzin 2012). Many netnographies are also conducted in teams, with the introspection of one team member balanced by the critical interpretations of other members. In addition, procedures for skeptical cross-checking of immersive data have been developed in the context of auto-netnographies (Howard 2020) and can be applied to all netnographies.

As this data type represents researcher experiences, observations, and reflections that took place in the context of an exploration, they require *contemplation* by that researcher or research team. For instance, in tourism research, a netnographer might note their emotional reactions when watching sustainability-related travel influencers. There could be recurrent sarcasm and bitterness in the immersion journal entries. A team of netnographers might closely examine the entries, classifying and organizing the emotional content and the contexts of their occurrence. The team may find that the negative reactions occurred mainly in relation to the confident presentation of naïve information by influencers. From the contemplation of that introspective element, they might be drawn to look for similar reactions in the corpus of interview or social media post data. In this way, analysis of introspection may lead to deeper and more empathic general insights. Similarly, the intersectional perspectives of team netnographers, as shared in their different immersion journals, would be analyzed differentially and the various strengths and drawback of their personal viewpoints incorporated into a rigorous collective analytic process.

Investigative data: Analysis and interpretation

Investigation involves the search for, engagement with, and collection of a limited number of informative and revealing digital traces, events, and opportunities to experience. The research-as-instrument invokes the process of *discovery*, and the core action in this movement is *choosing*. After sifting through a digital universe offering many video recordings, textual posts and comments, photos, graphic images, hashtags, sound files, and other types of traces, the netnographer chooses particular sources among them, deciding in another step to save from them a smaller set of potentially deep data. The result of this discovery and choice-oriented research process is data that is *discursive* in nature; it represents language used as a social practice. These discourses also contain narratives told in various forms, including using emoji strings and memes.

When netnographers analyze investigative data, they are not directly studying people or other social actors (companies, nonprofits, bots) but, rather, their digital echoes. These expressions range in meaning and purpose, spinning a complex web of communication, promotion, ideation, and relationship building. Tracking these digital footprints, netnographers encounter a variety of forms and formats, from compressed microblog posts to slickly filtered photos and videos. Commercial content of various forms, such as paid promotions by content creators, can be very difficult to distinguish from the unpromoted efforts of regular consumers. Texts generated by AI chatbots may become increasingly hard to filter from those produced by human tourists (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Regardless of origin or intent, however, each post represents a speech act—an utterance that, in its context, contributes to one or more ongoing digital exchanges. It adheres to, and is shaped by, the unspoken rules of rhetoric. The existence of each post is not only a free-standing social fact, but also an act of communication that plays particular roles and serves specific functions.

Unless forming part of the research question, most netnographies do not endeavor to authenticate posts or reveal the 'real' individual behind an account, pseudonym, digital avatar, or other posting entity. Searching for the tangible 'truth' of a social post is generally a futile exercise that detracts from the netnography's primary objective of knowledge building and cultural understanding.

Regardless of their source, each piece of investigative data is a narrative - it possesses elements of a story and contributes to a more extensive digital account. Many digital traces are embedded in discussions; they call out, respond to each other, reference topics and persons of mutual interest, incite reactions, and ignite further interactions. Simultaneously, each post is a discursive element that responds to a broader *discourse*, shaping and being shaped by the prevailing norms, ideologies, and power dynamics of its milieu.

Analyzing investigative data usually involves recontextualizing them or interpreting them from within the circumstances of their ongoing narratives. It also may involve classifying them as particular types of stories or interactions or contextualizing them within broader social and digital discourses. Interpretation will delicately balance micro and macro perspectives as netnographers zoom in and out of investigative data sources, topics, and elements.

For instance, a netnographer might begin an analysis by identifying the prevailing themes in social media discussions about a tourism destination. This might be followed by a more comprehensive understanding requiring delving into the minutiae of posts, such as their captions, images, textual content, language use, narrative patterns, hashtag and avatar symbolism, and the way these parts interrelate. Relating these elements to relevant socioeconomic and gendered factors at play, current events, the technology platform, and its underlying algorithms provides an even richer frame that emphasizes cultural sensemaking. Cultural understanding might involve not only recounting *what* was observed, experienced, or posted in the digital context, but explaining *why* it came to be—unpacking the social, technological, economic, and other forces behind its manifestation.

Interactive data: Analysis and interpretation

Interactive data is the result of social engagement with research participants and possesses a conversational character. It holds significant potential to uncover previously obscured topics or enhance the understanding of subject matter only superficially covered through investigative or immersive movements. Furthermore, such data can serve as a tool for verifying the demographics or perspectives of specific groups, especially when pivotal to the research question.

In interaction, the researcher-as-instrument acts through the process of *inquiry* and the core action involved in this movement is *eliciting*. Whether elicited in a mobile ethnography, through a carefully constructed research webpage, or during an online interview, interactive data is constructed in the act of asking and answering questions. The nature of the data is *dialogic*, as it results from a structured interaction between the researcher and the participant, with these interactions choreographed by the circumstances, actors, and process of inquiry. However, a nuanced understanding requires netnographers to recognize that, just like immersive and investigative data, interactive data is not an unequivocal reflection of reality. Like these other forms of netnographic data, it requires meticulous contextualization and interpretation.

Retrospective recall, as evident from legal and psychological contexts, has its limitations. A participant's vivid tales of adventures in Costa Rica's rainforests may not serve, for example, as irrefutable evidence of those experiences but, rather, might indicate the participant's desire to

impress the researcher. Alvesson (2010) underscores the constructed nature of interview data, proposing a "reflexive pragmatism" approach that we might extend to interactive data. This methodology calls for radical skepticism, steering netnographers away from perceiving interactive data as factual chronicles of reality. Interactants, after all, operate within the constraints of personal or political motivations, power dynamics, language nuances, and self-presentation, culturally complicating and socially layering their elicitations. Interpretations of these personal qualities and interpersonal dynamics may become important sources of insight.

Netnographers can also approach interactive data as social constructions that emerge from specific processes of guided self-reflection. Every piece of interactive data derives from a specific sociocultural and technological context, whether sourced from a naturalistic exchange in a virtual world, a confidential online interview, or a structured mission given to research participants through a mobile ethnography application. Understanding the nature of the elicitation context becomes pivotal to the classification, contextualization, and interpretation of its meaning. By doing so, the researcher will further deepen their skills of inquiry, questing beyond the elicitation itself into the cultural essentials underlying its emanation. This perspective invites netnographers on an empathic expedition, delving into others' experiences. When dealing with interactive data, its effective analysis as a *conversation* lies in adopting an interpretive stance that is simultaneously open, reflexive, skeptical, and pragmatic.

In summary, this section has followed the process portrayed in Figure 3 by elaborating the immersion, investigation, and interactive data collection movements, comparing, and contrasting their research processes and types of data, and relating these to appropriate analytic and interpretive frameworks. Each type of data is different, and each requires approaches tailored to its unique characteristics and the conditions of its creation. All netnographic data results from researcher engagement and the use of research ethics procedures, and its interpretation involves a combination of contextualization, organization, classification, interpretation, and sensemaking. Throughout each of these approaches to data collection, the researcher's reflexivity, engagement, ethical research stance, and awareness of cultural contexts remain paramount to the integrity and rigor of the netnography. This integrity and rigor are finalized in the act of (re-)presenting the research findings, as the netnography finally conveys cultural understanding to its audience.

Glimpsing the Future: The Intersection of AI and Netnography

The digital revolution has continually reshaped the terrains of academic inquiry, and netnography, as a digital method, finds itself at the crux of these shifts. Among these technological changes, AI looms large as a transformative force and its potential intersections with netnography are manifold (Marchuk et al., 2021). AI algorithms may provide helpful overviews of data, assisting netnographers in managing and organizing datasets, and helping them to find the right pieces of relevant deep data amid the many social sites available.

Yet, the frontiers of AI-assisted netnography extend beyond mere data management and analysis. AI can serve as a catalyst for brainstorming and structuring ideas, connecting seemingly disparate data points, analyzing small amounts of data such as single posts, and juxtaposing these analyses with extant theoretical frameworks. The AI-assisted netnography technique demonstrated in the work of Kozinets and Aksit (forthcoming) exemplifies this development.

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AI's increasing ability to analyze visual imagery, video, sound files, and even augmented or virtual reality recordings may also further enhance netnographers' ability to dive deeply into the significance of small amounts of carefully selected data.

Without human researchers providing first person perspectives on human realities as part of the data analysis, however, research cannot count as a netnography. Without delicate and iterative prompting, data coding done by AI resembles content analysis more than hermeneutic interpretation, and its unsupervised use will likely lead to reductionist or misrepresentative conclusions. Unlike big data analyses, which would be impossible without computational help, AI assistance is not particularly useful for the final analysis of the small amounts of data that many netnographers will collect. For these reasons, many netnographers will rightfully shy away from the use of AI for data analysis and rely on established methods. For others, there is likely a future for AI-assisted netnography, conducted as a collaborative endeavor, where AI is used as a data collection support tool or a writing aid and sounding board. Within this collaborative process, human researchers will have to continually push the AI for a deeper and more integrative interpretation of cultural elements, thus ensuring that the critical depth, context, and richness inherent to netnography remain center stage.

CONCLUSIONS

Tourism research has taken a position at the forefront of netnography's development, shaping its trajectory and infusing it with innovative approaches. This paper examines in depth the transformational strides netnography continues to take, with special attention to its expansive growth and relevance across a wide range of tourism-related research contexts and new technologies such as AI. From immersive studies of virtual worlds to explorations of visual and ephemeral messages on Pinterest and Snapchat, tourism netnographies reveal a landscape that is vast, varied, and thriving. Moreover, new research challenges netnography's traditional bounds and urges a move beyond online community-centric views. This paper not only charts the course of these advances but also extends the conversation by offering fresh insights into netnography's evolving contexts, scope, procedures, and sensibilities.

Netnography stands revealed as an adaptive, rigorous, cutting-edge tool, responsive to the changing needs of contemporary tourism research. Rather than pigeonholing netnography as merely a convenient means for inquiries into technological phenomena, this paper underscores its versatility, positioning it as a way to engender deep, contextual, and empathetic cultural understanding. For today's netnography is a powerful tool for unearthing the vast array of human and non-human activities represented through digital traces, online events, and technology-mediated experiential opportunities. From the complex interplay of cultural codes, languages, identities, roles, and rituals to wider societal, technical, and cultural undercurrents, netnography taps into layers that profoundly influence both the overarching paradigm of tourism and the ongoing intricacies of tourism-related phenomena. At its core, netnography furnishes researchers with the means to navigate and interpret the broad panorama of tourism, both digital and beyond.

As technological shifts bring about novel digital experiences, netnography's emphasis on immersion becomes ever more important. The reflexivity built into netnography's immersion journal methods encourages a more profound and ethically attuned engagement across a changing array of diverse digital platforms and experiences. Moreover, the focus on deep data,

the emphasis on the researcher as instrument, and the distinct analytical frames applied to the analysis and interpretation of specific data types distinguishes it from simplistic content analyses or big data analytics.

Netnography procedures and the ethical guidelines accompanying them provide a balanced combination of rigor, principled practice, and flexibility. Emphasizing a structured process, different types of data, the need for active researcher engagement, and distinct modes of interpretation and analysis, netnography equips research on technocultural phenomena while also facilitating cultural understandings of any digitally represented or digitally experienceable facet of tourism. As tourism researchers look towards tomorrow, we hope that they will not only add netnography to their research toolkits but will continue to contribute actively to its ongoing development.

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