

Netnography

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Fantasizing about vacations, talking about upcoming trips, taking and sharing pictures of special vacation moments, bragging about travel adventures, and staying in touch with travel companions or tourism providers are integral aspects across the various stages of the tourism experience. Ever more tourists around the world turn to social media and mobile apps to portray, construct, and relive their tourism experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In doing so, they produce vast amounts of digital traces, which serve as useful information to themselves and other tourists. These user-generated contents also represent invaluable data that can be translated into insights by regulators, destination managers, tourism providers and tourism researchers.

Starting with the conversations tourists had in online discussion forums and virtual travel communities like the Lonely Planet Thorntree, analyzing data from the online conversations, interactions and self-portrayals of tourists has become a major concern for tourism academia and practice. Since the mid-2000s (Whalen, 2018), tourism researchers have increasingly taken advantage of netnography as a research method to derive deep, cultural understandings from the digital traces tourists leave in cyberspace.

Netnography is a method to study social media and other online or mobile app-based data in a way that maintains the cultural complexities of its interactants' experiences. It keeps the social, cultural and contextual qualities of the data intact to achieve deep cultural understandings of the topics that users post about, the communities they form, and the interactions they have with various actors (brands, chatbots, influencers, platforms, etc.) while online. As social media platforms emerged and transformed, netnographic research followed and adapted existing methods to hunt for data. This means that netnography evolved and continues to evolve in relation to larger technological developments. As a result, netnography is a dynamic set of techniques for the study of the constantly evolving ecosystem of online and mobile platforms and applications, and of the phenomena they relate to (Kozinets, 2020a).

The method borrows from anthropology to the extent that the netnographic researcher is encouraged to pay close attention to the use of language, imagery, symbolism, hierarchy, ritual, and other nuances of human experience as they present themselves within the vast range of online behaviors. Important aspects to note about netnography are that it is capable of handling more dispersed and multi-sited locations of data—called “data sites” rather than fixed field sites. It is also focused on researcher engagement rather than participation.

Table 1 provides a comparison of several research methods, named in the first column, which use digital data to generate understanding. The second column designates whether the method is a general technique that covers a number of related techniques, or whether it is a specific technique. The third column indicates whether the method provides cultural understanding. The fourth shows whether the technique emphasizes research conducted with a requirement of researcher engagement. The fifth column signals the provision of specific research procedures. The sixth indicates the inclusion of clear and up-to-date guidelines for the conduct of ethical research using the method.

Big data analysis is a summary term that includes many kinds of inductive quantitative analyses of large sets of digital data that offer descriptive overviews or correlations rather than cultural understanding. Digital ethnography and online ethnography are general categories of inductive, culturally-focused research. Digital ethnography is the broader of the two and can include the ethnographic study of digital phenomena such as immigrant experiences working in microchip production factories. Online ethnography is the general category of techniques that attempt to bring an ethnographic sensibility to the collection and analysis of online information. Virtual ethnography is a particular kind of online ethnography that applies a philosophical approach to the idea of online fieldwork and emphasizes the partiality and flexibility of the adaptation of ethnography to online contexts.

Netnography differs from these other digital methods because it is the only method for researching digital traces that combines a cultural focus and emphasis on researcher immersion with specific procedural guidelines and clear, up-to-date rules for conducting ethical research. Crowdsourced and ever-evolving, netnography presents a set of guidelines combined with a flexible set of procedures to help researchers derive deep cultural understandings from digital interactions. It takes the affordances, non-human agencies, terms of use, use cultures and other specificities of platforms and applications into account.

Specifically, netnography is an explicit set of operational procedures for conducting qualitative research on digital data. It is founded in four basic steps of: (1) research inquiry, (2) data collection, (3) data analysis and interpretation, and (4) research communication. These four steps are further developed into six movements of initiation, investigation, interaction, immersion, integration, and instantiation. Embedded in these movements are several detailed research operations. These operations are sets of procedures that are adaptable to particular research contexts. The steps and movements exist to guide netnographic researchers through the entire research process, from finding a research question to presenting and submitting the final manuscript, and also to unify different netnographies and make them comparable with one another.

Every netnography starts with an initiation movement, which involves informational, organizational, regulatory and administrative preparation of the research. This includes ethical considerations and formal ethics approval from regulatory bodies. Rather than determining a specific, unchangeable research question, netnographers set an investigatory direction during this phase. Research questions can focus on empirical phenomena or theoretical constructs and, often, combine the two. Data collection procedures in netnography encompass three different kinds of movements. Beyond the primary collection of digital traces, netnography can include archival work. Both belong to the investigation movement and involve finding, observing, and selecting online traces to save from a data site or a variety of data sites.

Many netnographies also take advantage of probing forms of research, which constitute the interaction movement. To derive deep insight, netnography can use interviews of various kinds, from short online interviews to long in-person conversations. It also takes advantage of opportunities to actively elicit data through research websites or social media pages/groups specifically created for the purpose of encouraging users to generate contents that relate to the research question.

Importantly, netnography builds on the immersion of the researcher in the data as well as the sites from which they were collected. Because netnography embraces the reflexivity and positionality concerns of ethnography, netnography requires the involvement of the researcher, or the collective reflection of research team members. Data from this movement is captured in the form of notes written into immersion journals, which can be of various offline or online forms. Such researcher engagement ensures the contextual understanding necessary for cultural interpretations of the data and therefore needs to be included in all netnographies. Some netnographies only include the immersion movement and are called auto-netnographies.

Transforming the data into insights happens in the integration movement, in which familiar coding operations of qualitative data analysis are combined with the holistic and meaning-making interpretive elements related to hermeneutic studies. Finally, these insights are translated into communicable forms during the incarnation movement.

To summarize, in netnography, the ethnographic field site becomes a multi-sited online and offline site of potential data, a place to collect and then to curate digital traces. The methodological emphasis in netnography is on providing well-defined sub-procedures that guide the collection and analysis of digital verbal, visual, audio and audiovisual data in order to provide quality qualitative research. However, there is wide latitude and an encouragement of innovation in representation and data usage. Ultimately, netnographic research is designed to offer research operations that can be adapted for a variety of different platforms, phenomena, and research foci.

Kozinets (2020b) points to the natural fit between tourism and netnography, and several articles have been written that explain and develop the growing importance of netnography for tourism research. For example, Whalen (2018) shows not only that its use is increasing, but also illustrates its usefulness for understanding tourism-related phenomena. Heinonen and Medberg (2018) provide a comprehensive overview of the types of topics for which netnography may be particularly suitable. These include consumer experiences, consumer identity, authenticity, anti-consumption, co-creation, e-word of mouth, destination branding, and other topics of interest to tourism researchers.

Other tourism articles provide insightful exemplars of the application of the netnography approach. For example, Wu and Pearce (2014) demonstrated the utility of netnography for the investigation of a multicultural and mobile context--Chinese RV tourists. Their work combines an investigative approach (a study of Chinese blogs), with an interactive one (online messaging interviews with tourists), and immersion through the researchers' cultural identification and understanding. This understanding of Chinese culture is also on display in Zhang and Hitchcock's (2017) netnographic exploration of women travelers' experiences. This deep analysis of identity, drawn from a particularly meaningful immersion in a digital context, also forms the backbone of Tavakoli and Mura's (2015) exploration of the first authors' online experiences as an Iranian female tourist in a virtual space. These three empirical articles offer a useful set of readings that reveal how a netnography collects investigative, interactive, and immersive data and integrates them to develop deeper cultural understandings of tourism phenomena.

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Table 1: Comparison of inductive digital research methods

Social media method name (all inductive)	General research technique	Qualitative focus on meaning and culture	Emphasis on immersive engagement	Provides specific procedures	Clear ethical research guidelines
Big data analysis	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Digital ethnography	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Online ethnography	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Virtual ethnography	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
Netnography	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓