AOSIS

Netnography: An underapplied research method

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Boundary-crossing has become a distinctive feature of disciplines as composition scholars continue to bravely cross borders into other disciplines to deepen understandings of–and take risks with– methodologies that may not be familiar. Indeed, the ubiquity of social media has destabilized our traditional methods for studying communication, leaving many researchers to wonder, what methods are most appropriate for studying the contested and shifting spaces of online communities? (Covington 2019, n.p.)

As researchers, we are constantly looking for new information and breakthrough methodologies to improve and progress our disciplines. Netnography, for those who are not yet aware of it, is such a breakthrough – providing the access to and analysis of a wealth of information that has never been accessible. Specifically taking marketing academics into consideration, Netnography provides an open window into consumer's lives. Although it has been used extensively in western countries for close to three decades, it is fairly new to South African scholars. Netnographic research only started to surface in South Africa just under 10 years ago. Over a 100 papers across different disciplines have since been published, with a marked increase in the last 4 years. The research conducted is diverse and has ranged from analysing the online content of the #feesmustfall movement to predicting the outcome of municipal elections. There have also been multiple marketing research papers using Netnography with topics ranging from analysing consumer behaviour online to examining how organisations interact with their target markets in social media spaces. Plain old sentiment analysis is no longer enough, it needs to be accompanied by explanations of online trends and patterns and why consumers feel the way they do about products, brands and organisations.

Robert Kozinets, coined the term 'netnography' in 1995, and first used it to analyse online content in relation to the Star Trek movies. From there he went onto becoming prolific in his research domain, with an average iH-index of 95 with over 40 000 citations across his publications. Kozinets et al. (2010) defines netnography as 'an adaptation of ethnography for the online world, which is concerned with the study of online content, cultures, and communities as distinct social phenomena, rather than isolated content'. He continues by stating that it is a particularly good method to examine the relationship between online and offline actions.

For those who may be rusty in using ethnography, or who have never used it at all, it is often used by anthropologists to examine the behaviour of people, society, and culture in their everyday lives. Fast forward 30 years, organisations and people now have online customs and carry out their businesses and lives online.

Consider for a moment that there are nearly 2 billion websites, with over 5 billion internet users, and this number is growing (Statista 2022). As the global population grows, so does our electronic footprint, with large amounts of data and information being generated on social media and organisations' websites – and it all exists in the public domain. This means it is freely accessible to be analysed and transformed into something meaningful. The opportunities this presents for researcher are endless and by no means discipline specific.

A fundamental question for researchers is what is netnography? Is it a paradigm? A design? An approach? Or a data collection method? Is the information gathered on websites and on social media classified as primary or secondary data? The ethical researcher would go further, and ask how ethical it is to follow, document and analyse what organisations and people are doing and saying online. None of these are easy questions, but as scholars we are required to apply our minds to the answers.

To answer the question 'what is it?' In essence it is a three-pronged qualitative data collection method; researchers can either collect online information directly, or they gather data generated through the capture and recording of online community events and interactions or lastly, it can be data the researcher sketches as field notes (Kozinets et al. 2010). Interested scholars might find

Costello, McDermott and Wallace's (2017) discussion of the history of netnography an essential reading, it provides a rich explanation of the journey scientists have been on over the last decade to accurately capture the multi-dimensionality of the concept. Even Kozinets himself has evolved his definition over the years and continues to evolve and refine the method, continually adding new dimensions to it.

With respect to the question of whether netnographic data is primary or secondary - one might assume that since it already exists and is available for use, it is secondary data. Although understandable, this assumption doesn't take the whole picture into account. The fact is that although data may already be there, it is raw and has not yet been turned into anything meaningful – which fundamentally means it is primary data. This is still up for debate of course, as is so much in research and dependent on the given parameters of a specific research project.

Being an ethical researcher requires that we also apply our minds to the ethics of research in the online space, which adds an entirely new dimension to ethical research practices. Of course, all the traditional ethical standards in research apply, taking the Helsinki Declaration and Belmont Principles into account. Further online ethical considerations are highlighted in Cilliers and Viljoen (2021) and are premised upon the argument of what is in the private domain versus the public domain. Generally, if the data is freely available online, then the owner of the data cannot expect privacy. With respect to social media, the onus is on the users to protect their information, because it too is otherwise freely available to be viewed by anyone. With netnographic research in mind, scholars also need to engage with the *Protection of Privacy of Information (POPI) Act*, to ensure that any data collection and reporting methods are both ethical and lawful.

Having answered these and other methodological questions, it is useful to consider what is the fundamental value of bringing this topic up now? What scholarly value does it hold for management academics? As we emerge into a new post COVID world, we have seen huge and lasting changes in the way people work and connect. Management scientists cannot be left behind - online, and social media research is here to stay, and it is not just for anthropologists. The plethora of data available online knows no boundaries and in the future may not continue to exist in its current state. This is a something that requires reflection and action by researchers.

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