Netnography: Two Methodological Issues and the Consequences for Teaching and Practice

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Abstract

As part of a transnational project focused on creating Open Education Resources (OERs) on selected digital methods, the authors are currently developing an OER on netnography. Designing this OER, we have identified two pertinent methodological issues of netnography that have been debated during recent years: the need to shift focus from "community" to "consociality" and the issue of active versus passive approaches. Using these two methodological issues as a starting point, this paper outlines our understanding of netnography. It provides examples of consequences for how netnography can be taught and practiced in action. Two cases with practical assignments are discussed in relation to the methodological considerations together with insights for teaching and netnographic practice. In the first case, students are invited to investigate a digital community of their own choosing that they know well. The second case introduces students to an accessible online tool suitable for learning about fundamentals of Social Network Analysis (SNA) for studying consociality using data from Twitter.

Keywords

Netnography, community, consociality, methodology, teaching

1. Introduction

As part of the transnational project *Digital Methods Platform for Arts and Humanities* (DiMPAH) focused on creating Open Educational Resources (OERs) on selected digital methods and fostering learning experiences by taking data from the past into future stories, the authors are currently developing an OER on netnography. As this OER is being developed, the methodological discussion and the practical assignments presented in this paper will guide the further development of assignments using digital tools included in the DiMPAH-suite, such as NewsEye – a digital investigator for historical newspapers (https://platform2.newseye.eu/), to enable students to write new stories for Europe.

In this paper, we discuss two methodological issues that have been identified while developing this OER and we present two approaches for teaching and practicing netnography that we are currently developing in response to these issues. First, we will briefly introduce netnography as a methodology and a field of research. We will then proceed to discuss the methodological issues that this paper is centered around, and then two approaches for teaching and practicing netnography will be presented. The paper ends with some concluding remarks and suggestions for teachers and researchers interested in netnographic approaches.

As the name indicates, netnography has been developed out of ethnography and consequently a cultural focus is a starting point for netnographic research where meaning is sought from social patterns of digital interactions [1]. There are several strands of research rooted in ethnography and focused on digital interactions, such as social media ethnography [e.g. 2] and digital ethnography [see 3]. Robert Kozinets, who coined the term in the 1990s, recently described netnography as offering a recipe book

with clear directions for doing qualitative social media research [1]. The netnographic approach requires what Kozinets refers to as immersive engagement [1], that is active intellectual and emotional engagement with the phenomenon studied. In classic ethnography, this approach is known as participation, a concept traditionally combined with observation in the notion of participant observation [4]. In netnography, this immersive engagement often involves conversations with other people, but not exclusively. Two main insights form the basis of netnography: first, that nearly all aspects of our social interactions today are to some extent digital, and second, that digital interactions should be studied using methods that are appropriate for studying digital interactions [1].

In recent years, netnography has been used within a variety of disciplines and empirical settings. For example, netnography is used to study how social media brand communities may develop a sense of community and place amongst sports fans [5], to study information literacy and norms of learning in a digital community in pre-school teacher education [6], and to study a digital community of lesbian mothers dealing with postpartum depression [7]. These examples of previous netnographic research differ in strategies to achieve immersive engagement with the phenomenon studied, but they all employ the notion of community to discuss the social patterns of digital interactions being studied. However, the concept of community in current netnographic research is not uncontested.

Designing this OER, we have identified two pertinent methodological issues of netnography that have been debated during recent years: the need to shift focus from "community" to "consociality" [8] and the issue of active versus passive approaches [9]. Next, these two methodological issues are discussed in more detail and related to each other.

1.1. Community and Consociality

Digital communities were a central concept and a common point of departure for netnographic studies during the early days of netnographic research. A digital community typically refers to a group of people engaged in social interaction, forming lasting relations, and united by a common place for this interaction to occur [10]. As for other places that facilitates social interactions, digital communities are important parts of people's everyday lives and they may be used for a variety of activities, for example sharing of information of emotional support. Consequently, digital communities may be found wherever people meet around common interests to share experiences and to socialize, for example on internet forums and on social network sites. However, use of concepts such as community, culture, and identity in digital settings has been critiqued within ethnographic research in recent years [see 3]. If we take into account the nature of digital interactions occurring in unstable contexts and where identities are increasingly situational and multifaceted, we may question whether people involved in such digital interactions actually can be understood as members of a community. These issues indicate that netnographic research should avoid unreflected and uncritical use of the community concept [11], and take into account the nature of shifting identity positions and different ways of understanding a digital community.

Earlier iterations of netnography centered on "community" and "culture" were in line with current understandings of online sociality. While other forms of socialities have become increasingly dominant on internet today, communities still exist – but perhaps more common are the broad highways of dispersed mass media offered by the social-media giants [1]. For these reasons, instead of community, scholars have proposed the notion of consociality as more suited for the dispersed social media environment of today. Consociality refers to "the physical and/or virtual co-presence of social actors in a network, providing an opportunity for social interaction between them" [8, p. 23]. This definition of consociality is in line with how researchers from social media ethnography have suggested a shift from online communities to digital socialities [2]. Consociality is more about contextual fellowship (what we share) than the identity boundary (who we are) associated with communities. While this position holds merit, online communities still exist (and warrant consideration), and consequently, we argue for two possible points of departure for conducting netnographic investigations:

1. Community-based netnography, using the notion of community, focused on interactions characterized by (lasting) communal ties and practices;

2. Consociality-based netnography, using the notion of consociality, focusing on interactions characterized by (fleeting) connections in contextual fellowships.

These two points of departure frame the nature of the phenomenon of study in slightly different ways, leading us to the debate concerning active and passive approaches in netnographic studies. Costello, McDermott, and Wallace [9] problematize a certain preference for "observational" or "non-participatory" approaches. Such passive approaches include unobtrusive observations of interactions in a specific social setting. Active approaches include processes to generate elicited material through interactions (such as interviews) between researcher and participants and the writing of field notes.

The critique of passive approaches echoes how a key strength of netnography has historically been described as providing ethnographically thick descriptions of online interactions through the intense and sustained involvement of the researcher in the daily life of the participants [10]. However, passive approaches are useful to help us navigate vast amounts of digital data and social sites and possibly gain a higher representativity and reduce the risk of bias [1]. Therefore, we propose that for community-based netnography, it is advisable to engage mainly in active approaches to engage with participants of a community over time. For consociality-based netnography, passive approaches such as selecting and archiving online traces can be enough to conduct a netnographic study. Still, active approaches such as taking field notes should be considered. Drawing on this methodological discussion, in the next section, we provide two cases with practical assignments illustrating how netnography can be taught and practiced in action depending on how you choose to approach netnography.

2. Consequences for Netnography in Teaching and Practice

Two cases with practical assignments will now be discussed in relation to the methodological considerations discussed above, together with insights for teaching and netnographic practice. In the first case, students are invited to investigate a digital community of their own choosing that they know well. The second case introduces students to an accessible online tool suitable for learning about fundamentals of Social Network Analysis (SNA) while studying consociality using data from Twitter.

2.1. Case 1: Community-based Netnography

By using the notion of community, where focus is placed on interactions characterized by lasting communal ties and practices, netnographic research moves close to its ethnographic roots and aspires to provide rich accounts of digital interactions among a group of people united by a common interest. As communal relations and practices can be socially complex, saturated by shared experiences, specific language and norms, the researcher needs to find a way to connect with the insider's understanding of the community. This calls for active approaches during a lengthier period of time. Active approaches include a certain measure of interaction with the participants of a community, often using the ethnographic strategy participant observation where the researcher is present in the community during an extended period of time, learning about the community through observing the interactions taking place and to some degree through interacting with participants, for example through casual conversations or by formal interviews. Using active approaches allow for collaborations with participants that may offer valuable perspectives from insiders, for example concerning certain concepts and social practices specific for a particular social context [12]. These insights make it possible to provide rich accounts with high levels of detail and validity. Notably, also data-collection procedures focused on observation can be considered a viable part of an active approach when the researcher actively engages with the phenomenon studied, for instance through sustained contact, emotional involvement, and writing reflective field notes [1].

Active approaches generally require more time than passive approaches. To allow for the students to get a sense of the dynamics of community-based netnography with active approaches, but without having to spend a lengthier time immersing in a new community, we will let students select a digital community they already consider themselves members of. This can be a Facebook Group, an online forum, or any other place where people come together around a shared interest. The students are then to reflect on the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the shared interest that has brought the participants together?

2. How is the community shaped by the nature of this shared interest (e.g., language, types of people, humor, and norms)?
3. What would seem strange or hard to understand for an outsider?
4. How is the community making use of the digital setting(s) (ways of communication, ways to foster communal ties)?
5. How is the digital platform shaping social interactions?

The reflections are to be written down as field notes. Field notes are important as tools for reflection and as analytical guides while conducting netnographic research which is inductive and explorative by nature [1]. Field notes typically capture experiences of what it is like to be a researcher, interactions with participants, and notes taken while observing and archiving online traces (such as posts to a Facebook Group) explaining the context of the situation observed. Reflections about yourself and your background, and how this affects your understanding of, and interactions with, participants and phenomena in the community studied, including the materiality of being online [2], should also be part of the field notes taken. Such reflections can form the basis of an autonetnographic study, focusing on autobiographical details and introspection, or otherwise supply your netnographic account with significant reflexive depth increasing the validity of the study.

Then the students will have the option to prepare an interview guide, centered on their own personal understanding of the digital community in question. The interview questions should be informed by the reflections written down as field notes and continue to investigate these central issues, but also leave room for the interview person to initially provide free accounts of their history in the community and their experiences. For the purpose of this assignment, the interview can be conducted with a person the student knows well in the community. The main findings from the field notes and the optional interview, including procedures for informed consent, may then be presented to the interview person and then possibly to the community (in a form suitable for the community in question, and if the interview person agrees).

2.2. Case 2: Consociality-based Netnography

While potentially offering valuable and rich accounts of online sociality, the interactive and reflective focus of active approaches may result in difficulties to recognize larger trends and issues as digital contexts and interactions are experienced, performed and shared with increasing speed [1]. If we choose to conduct our netnographic inquiry using the notion of consociality, focusing on interactions characterized by fleeting connections in contextual fellowships, passive approaches are of good use to allow for charting unstable social networks and vast amounts of digital data. Importantly, passive approaches can also enable unobtrusive studies of social settings that are otherwise difficult to study, for example when approaching sensitive or stigmatic phenomena. The lurking or "voyeuristic quality" of netnography should also be understood as a methodological strength in general [11, 1]. Passive approaches, that are "observational" or "non-participatory" [9] require no (or very limited) interaction with participants, can provide accessibility to social settings otherwise not available for study (of course, ethical guidelines for doing research must still be respected). Passively lurking, or observing from a certain (analytical) distance, means that the researcher is not as personally involved with the participants and the field of study, something that may arguably reduce the risk of bias. Passive approaches can be combined with different analytical procedures, such as content analysis of communication in online forums [7] or thematic analysis of a high number of blog posts [13]. However, relying solely on passive approaches may result in netnographic research without the insider's perspective and without the nuanced understandings of certain phenomena that comes with these insights [1]. One advantage with passive approaches is that they can be employed more quickly and cost-effectively, compared to active approaches, for example by using tools for automated data-collection. The digital settings allow for several methods that can aid netnography using passive approaches. One method well-suited for quantitative studies of the digital contextual fellowships focused by the concept of consociality is Social Network Analysis (SNA) that can be used to map networks. SNA offers a quantitative understanding of connections between entities, and the relations

between actors and the structure of these relations [14]. One accessible way to begin to learn more about SNA using data from Twitter is Mentionmapp (https://mentionmapp.com/).

The online tool Mentionmapp helps you visualize who is interacting with you on Twitter using mentions and hashtags providing a way to present your social network on Twitter. The students may enter their username from Twitter, then Mentionmapp visualizes a spiderweb of the most mentioned names and hashtags by the selected Twitter user. Mentionmapp shows nodes of the network, the Twitter user, and the connection between these users, which is called a link. This connection can be an interaction like following a Twitter user or mentions of any sort on Twitter. With Mentionmapp, you can quickly visualize simple SNA where strength is considered as mentions. In the visualization, you get highlighted nodes that indicate the most significant number of mutual mentions. The more mentions, the thicker the line connecting the nodes. Students can use this to discover accounts that mention their tweets and their accounts. For Twitter network analysis, this allows students to see the people they have the most conversations with and how other influential Twitter users connect to them and others. Besides studying their own Twitter account, students can type in the username of someone on Twitter they want to know more about in terms of their connections.

As an assignment for practicing SNA as a part of doing consociality-based netnography, students are to consider the following questions when analyzing their Twitter accounts with Mentionmapp:

1. What are the 10 most mentioned names and hashtags of your Twitter account? What accounts mention your tweets the most, and what are the accounts you mention the most? Or, in other words, what accounts do you seem to be mainly preoccupied with, and with what hashtags?
2. What are the 10 most mentioned names and hashtags by a selected Twitter user, like a politician, your favorite musician, the UN etc.? What accounts do they seem to be mainly preoccupied with, and with what hashtags?
3. How is the digital platform shaping social interactions?

Through this assignment, students are introduced to an easy-to-use tool for doing SNA that open for discussions around central concepts such as nodes, edges, and centrality. Using this exercise, students may also be able to discover changes in their networks on Twitter over time, consequently illustrating aspects of the fluid character of much online sociality. The exercise also opens up for ways to identify communities and their central members, illustrating how SNA can be used in netnography as a way to inform community-based approaches [see also 14]. To foster reflection and active engagement with the material generated by this passive approach, students are advised to write field notes capturing their insights and reflections while doing this assignment.

3. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have discussed two different starting points for doing netnography, either focused on the notion of consociality as proposed by Perren and Kozinets [8] or focusing on the established notion of community that has guided much netnographic research. In relation to recent problematizations of perceived preferences for passive or "non-participatory" approaches in netnography [9] we have argued that community-based netnography should engage mainly in active approaches to interact and engage with participants of a community over time. Consociality-based netnography, more focused on unstable and fleeting forms of sociality, can rely more substantially on passive approaches such as selecting, archiving, and analyzing traces of digital interactions. Arguably, fleeting forms of sociality are better captured and studied using methods geared towards analysis of quantitative data, such as SNA, to discover significant trends and changes over time. Communities, with lasting relations and social expressions evolving during longer time periods, may require a higher degree of involvement and activity from the netnographic researcher. This argument is of course made on an analytical level – in reality, the differences between community and consociality may be hard to identify, and the distinctions we have made in this paper are meant to foster reflection on different ways to think about netnography and to use digital methods.

As indicated by Kozinets [1], doing netnography entails using a variety of methods to produce material that may be placed on a spectrum from passive approaches focused on observation to more

active strategies involving participation. However, this spectrum is a scale of many nuances. Examples of the combination of netnographic procedures of both active and passive orientation can be found in several netnographies combining unobtrusive observations of digital interactions in communities with interviews and other forms of participation [see for example 13, 6]. Additionally, previous studies have shown how SNA can be used to identify important actors in a social network for further active investigations, such as participant observations and interviews [14]. In a sense, all approaches can be said to include active and passive approaches. Even if we are lurking and observing digital interactions unobtrusively, for example on Twitter, remaining at a distance from the participants observed – if we are to understand the interactions in any deeper sense, we will need to engage in some ways with the material collected. In essence, we need to make use of our intellectual and emotional capacities and doing this means, at least to some degree, to engage in a form of active netnographic approach affording a sense of community [cf. 1]. However, for our purposes as we aim to discuss, teach, and develop a methodology, it can be helpful to consider the typology of active and passive netnographic procedures and the two different starting points for doing netnography that we have connected to these approaches: community-based netnography and consociality-based netnography.

In this paper, we have illustrated some strengths and limitations of active and passive approaches for doing netnography. As researchers and creators of an OER on netnography, we strongly believe that netnography calls for a variety of methods and approaches, both approaches considered active (participatory) and passive (non-participatory). The cultural focus of netnography implies that cultural experiences must be had – active intellectual and emotional engagement are necessary when doing netnography. This means that while passive approaches are viable, and often essential for understanding digital interactions of consocialities or discovering certain features of communities, they require active learning and reflection, for example through the writing of field notes. In practice, some degree of interaction (an active approach) is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied. Conversely, since netnography is data-centric, passive approaches, such as SNA, are important when we are navigating and trying to make sense out of vast quantities of online data. Combining these two approaches (active and passive), realizing that active and passive approaches always coexist, and considering the two different starting points for doing netnography (community and consociality) will provide aspiring netnographers with a more nuanced understanding of the opportunities for discovery and cultural experiences offered by digital interactions.

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5. References

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