



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
Research Online

---

Faculty of Business - Papers

Faculty of Business

---

2015

# Reflecting on ethics in netnographic research

Namita Roy

*University of Wollongong*, [ng381@uowmail.edu.au](mailto:ng381@uowmail.edu.au)

Ulrike Gretzel

*University of Vienna*, [ugretzel@uow.edu.au](mailto:ugretzel@uow.edu.au)

Venkata K. Yanamandram

*University of Wollongong*, [venkaty@uow.edu.au](mailto:venkaty@uow.edu.au)

Gordon R. Waitt

*University of Wollongong*, [gwaitt@uow.edu.au](mailto:gwaitt@uow.edu.au)

---

## Publication Details

Roy, N., Gretzel, U., Yanamandram, V. K. & Waitt, G. R. (2015). Reflecting on Ethics in Netnographic Research. 2015 ANZMAC Conference: Innovation and Growth Strategies in Marketing (pp. 347-353). Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# Reflecting on ethics in netnographic research

## **Abstract**

Netnography uses a mix of unobtrusive as well as interactive methods of research to study consumer behaviour online. The evolving technology has created greater avenues for researchers to apply different ethnographic methods online. However, it has also posed a number of ethical debates. This paper provides a reflective account of ethical dilemmas that were faced by me (researcher) while working on an ethics application using the methods of Netnography. It uses the context of the researcher's PhD research ethics application, to highlight the issues of domain, consent and privacy encountered while working on the ethics application. This paper contributes through the use of reflexivity to highlight the processual dilemmas faced in detailing the Netnographic methodology.

## **Disciplines**

Business

## **Publication Details**

Roy, N., Gretzel, U., Yanamandram, V. K. & Waitt, G. R. (2015). Reflecting on Ethics in Netnographic Research. 2015 ANZMAC Conference: Innovation and Growth Strategies in Marketing (pp. 347-353). Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales.

## Reflecting on Ethics in Netnographic Research

Namita Roy, University of Wollongong, [ng381@uowmail.edu.au](mailto:ng381@uowmail.edu.au)  
Ulrike Gretzel, University of Queensland, [u.gretzel@business.uq.edu.au](mailto:u.gretzel@business.uq.edu.au)  
Venkat Yanamandram, University of Wollongong, [venkaty@uow.edu.au](mailto:venkaty@uow.edu.au)  
Gordon Waitt, University of Wollongong, [gwaitt@uow.edu.au](mailto:gwaitt@uow.edu.au)

### Abstract

**Netnography uses a mix of unobtrusive as well as interactive methods of research to study consumer behaviour online. The evolving technology has created greater avenues for researchers to apply different ethnographic methods online. However, it has also posed a number of ethical debates. This paper provides a reflective account of ethical dilemmas that were faced by me (researcher) while working on an ethics application using the methods of Netnography. It uses the context of the researcher's PhD research ethics application, to highlight the issues of domain, consent and privacy encountered while working on the ethics application. This paper contributes through the use of reflexivity to highlight the processual dilemmas faced in detailing the Netnographic methodology.**

*Keywords: Netnography, Reflexivity, Ethical Research*

*Track: Marketing Research Methods*

## 1. Introduction

Where traditional marketing research methodologies are being supplemented by qualitative understandings of consumer experiences and choices, Netnography (Kozinets, 1997) allows insight through application of various ethnographic methods online. With the advancement in technology, the researcher has transformed from being a passive observer studying textual discourses (Kozinets, 2002), to an active participant using different media such as audio, video, gaming etc. (Kozinets, 2015). Hence, this methodology is gaining traction amongst qualitative researchers as it easily adapts ethnographic methods to technology changes.

Recent advancements in technology such as GPS (Global Positioning Systems), mobile applications and mobile internet allow access to real time data which enables phenomenological research of lived experience through Netnography. Use of different media, such as video and photos as data forms allow plural understandings of material, cultural and social relationships (Mkono, Ruhanen, & Markwell, 2015). In other words, long term and continuous exposure to lived experiences through different media allow researchers to understand the fluidity and depth of human social interactions in any given context, which is expedited and easily accessed online.

Therefore, the post-phenomenological concepts of studying non-representational<sup>1</sup> modes of thought (Cadman, 2009), embodiment<sup>2</sup> (Csordas, 1994; Harrison, 2000; Rakić & Chambers, 2012) and performativity<sup>3</sup> (Büscher & Urry, 2009; Nash, 2000; Tumbat & Belk, 2013) can all be researched online by applying methods of auto-netnography (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009) and observant participation (McGreen & Arnedillo Sánchez, 2005; Moeran, 2009). Auto-netnography, similar to auto-ethnography, captures researchers' personal experiences in the field that in this case is the online platform. The observant participant method requires the researcher to actively participate as part of the group/ as an insider so that their perceptions are shaped accordingly. Observant participation is also employed during auto-ethnographic research in cases where the researcher is part of a group.

With the increasing ease of conducting such phenomenological research online, qualitative researchers are faced with gaps in underdeveloped methodological details (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). With the consumers now able to express through different media as well as platforms, researchers have a varied pool of resources. However, it presents a highly complex jigsaw for manoeuvring around ethical issues. Issues of access, definitions of private and public, integration of different type of data, informed consent, timelines of research, number of participants etc., are all case specific and do not allow for a single strategy to be followed by the researcher.

Being case specific, reflexivity in detailing the process allows other researchers to learn about the nuances of fieldwork. Reflective writing is a paradigmatic shift from the traditional writing processes encouraging the researcher's role in the research (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007). Despite its adoption in different fields such as geography, anthropology and sociology, its application in marketing is limited (Hackley, 2003; Mason, Kjellberg, & Hagberg, 2015). Mason et al. (2015) argue that reflective accounts supplement empirical

---

<sup>1</sup> A mode of thinking which seeks to immerse itself in everyday practices of consumption and is reflected through different bodily movements.

<sup>2</sup> Behaviour of the body prior to reflexive or cognitive thought used to decipher the mental processes related to an experience

<sup>3</sup> Performativity studies the interaction of people within a given context, expressed through their actions and manoeuvres in social situations. For example, portrayal of the self through clothes, behaviour and talk as a woman can be classified as the performance of gender.

investigation of marketing theories highlighting the process of 'how' they perform in certain situations. In case of Netnographic studies, where the processes and methods being played out in the technology arena are so diverse, reflective accounts of the research process are crucial to enhance the underdeveloped methodological details. This paper highlights the manoeuvring and negotiation necessary for conducting netnographic research ethically. It contributes to the processual discourse on Netnography through a reflective summary on completing an ethics application.

## **2. Research context and Positionality: Studying Tourist Experiences on Themed Routes**

Before starting my PhD journey, I was always interested in qualitative research. I was exposed to Netnography as a qualitative research method during my first year and was intrigued. However, I did not look into it till the time I was deciding on my methodology.

My PhD research aims at investigating the value derived from themed route consumption. Themed routes are routes of national/state significance that link key destinations through a unique and unified theme portraying distinct experiences (Olsen, 2003). Examples include Route 66 in U.S., Great Ocean Road in Australia, and Santiago de Compostela in Europe etc. Though themed marketing is not a new concept, it's not been studied much in literature. I am interested in understanding how theming creates value in context of tourist routes. While reviewing the literature I was fascinated by how value were enhanced by mobility (Butler & Hannam, 2012; Quinlan Cutler, Carmichael, & Doherty, 2014; Urry, 2004; Zakrisson & Zillinger, 2011), presence of other tourists (Tumbat & Belk, 2013), the experiences that were undertaken and the theme itself (Arnould & Price, 1993; Caton & Santos, 2007; Lego, Wodo, McFee, & Solomon, 2002; Lynch, 2010). The question of how all these aspects in conjunction created a distinct experience led me towards using post-structuralist methodologies.

Influenced by the post-structuralist ideas of multiple realities (Foucault, 1954; Giddens, Giddens, & Turner, 1987), I am fascinated by how different experiences of tourists affect perceived value. Experiences are created through an amalgamation of various social, material, functional and sensory relationships which are not only described but also embodied and performed (Minkiewicz, Evans, & Bridson, 2013; Tumbat & Belk, 2013). Therefore, studying experiences, from the phenomenological understandings of performativity and embodiment became imperative for me as a researcher. I was excited to learn and apply these principles in my research. Hence, while formulating my methodology I decided to use mobile research methods including auto-ethnography and videography along with qualitative interviews. I decided to do my fieldwork on the 3000km long route connecting Darwin to Adelaide themed as the Explorer's way. However not until my supervisors pushed me towards exploring extant data online before starting fieldwork, I realized the value of Netnography.

There is an abundance of user generated content on social networking sites, blogs, groups, videos, photos as well as tourism websites that illustrate tourist experiences on themed routes. Hence, I decided to add Netnography to my methods as an exploratory exercise to gain preliminary understandings of how people derive value from consuming/experiencing themed routes in the specific case of the Explorer's Way.

### 3. Navigating Ethics

Before getting into the method of Netnography, I decided to break my fieldwork into 2 phases, one that would include offline methods and the other to include online methods (Netnography). This helped in structuring the fieldwork in a way that I could have two separate ethics applications for both phases of the fieldwork. Hence, I started with Netnography. Kozinets (2010) describes interviews, observation and participation as the broad methods to conduct Netnography. However, all these methods are so intertwined and dependent on each other that it is difficult to discuss them as separate for the purposes of ethics clearance. Observation could be conducted alongside or followed by participation, which could be again conducted alongside or followed by interviews. One could observe the discussions on a group that are ongoing, as well as observe archives of past discussions of the same group; participate through liking and commenting as well as by asking open questions on the group. Hence I decided to seek ethics approval for multiple Netnographic research methods simultaneously, which included observation and participation.

Further, in this case the potential candidates first needed to be identified for interviewing, which required observing and / or participating in a group as preliminary steps. Online, this would be regarded as preliminary gauging/data collection and would require ethics clearance separately. Hence, I decided to separate the interview method into another stage and remove it from my ethics application. Now, my research consists of two phases, of which phase 1 has two stages. Stage 1 comprising observation and participation and stage 2 comprising interviewing.

#### *3.1. Who are the participants?*

It is important to understand who the participants are to decipher ethical boundaries. The major dilemma in Netnography is that as a researcher, you do not know who these people are. Not only could most users use pseudo names, but there is a good chance that they would not acknowledge their real age or gender. As most websites allow members from 14 years of age, you are never sure whether you should apply ethical guidelines pertaining to interacting with a child or not. All the more, in Australia, there are strictly regulated procedures to deal with research on children and special guidelines need to be followed. This also means that the ethics application will go through the full human ethics research committee, which is a lengthier process and could delay the estimated research timelines.

Additionally, if the researcher is interested in participating in privately moderated groups one would need to seek access to the group only given by the moderator who acts as the gatekeeper for the group and needs to be informed first. Hence the standard participant information sheet will need to be sent to the moderator who will then inform and seek consent from the members of the group simply to provide access to the researcher. However, if it's a forum/group (for eg. TripAdvisor), which anyone is free to join, these access rules do not apply. Hence, I decided to have another set of participant information email/message to be sent only to moderators and treated the moderator separate to a participant. This did mean that I had more appendices and information to be shared than in a traditional application.

#### *3.2. Access to Data*

There is no standard way of defining the domain of research in the case of Netnography. One would be searching through websites, but with the variety of data ranging from blog, video, photo, tweet, location, interest, group posting, personal message, listserv entry etc. it is extremely difficult to discuss ethical usage of each of these data points in simple words with

an ethics committee. Additionally, each of these may follow different privacy guidelines based on the individual websites that these have been picked from, adding to the ethical dilemma of privacy and data access. Without getting into the continuing debate on public and private, I decided to use the individual website/company's privacy laws to assess whether I could access the information (public information) and use it or whether I had to seek individual permission. This helped me define information dissemination and consent seeking strategy for ethics clearance.

Hence, I decided to use the most basic form of online data point and defined it as a 'post', which included all data points together. I then segregated them in terms of 'publicly accessible posts' which did not require privacy authentications from individuals or moderators for usage and 'private posts' that did. Hence, defining (in layman language) terms and processes helped me reduce any chances of confusion over type and nature of data for the ethics committee.

### *3.3. Information and consent – what, when, where, how?*

The problem with accessing different websites with different privacy policies is that one needs to follow different protocols as well as timelines to inform and seek consent from participants. In the case of public groups and archived discussions one can straightaway seek informed consent for data usage from individual group members while in private groups one would need to go through the moderator and seek access to the data and then seek individual consent of group members in case of specific data usage. This required me to delineate different timelines and ways to first inform and later seek consent, which is different from a traditional information sheet and consent form. Hence, I had to devise introductory posts to be used as an information sheet as my first post entry into the group.

Non-traditional participant information sheets and consent forms are a given in Netnography. Xun and Reynolds (2010) typed the consent into the chatbox and sent it to the participant. Kozinets (2015) suggests using emails, personal messages as well as group messages to seek consent which should follow the mood of the group in terms of language. Though there is a debate whether publicly accessible data can be considered as secondary data or not, I thought it was better to side with the views of Kozinets (2015) to seek consent from individual participants in case I was quoting them or using their pictures or videos.

A real issue is in reaching the individual participants for consent. As most of the members of the groups may or may not be sharing personal emails on the group, the consent request might involve further stages. For instance, the researcher could put up a consent request to a participant on the group, to which the relevant participant could respond positively or negatively. In case the participant requires more information, the consent email/message would need to be sent separately and specifically to the participant.

### *3.4. Risks to research*

Other than the risks to the participant that are minimised by following website/company privacy policies, there are potential risks to research. As informed consent is sought to enter a private group, it is always possible that access will be denied, as some people do not want the hovering/ analysing eye of the researcher on their private messages (Kozinets, 2015; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Hence, the research risks losing data from private groups if the researcher openly declares his/her intentions. Similarly, the presence of the researcher may cause withdrawal of participants or silence in public or open groups. This needs to be resolved by contacting greater numbers of groups, expecting at least one out of ten groups contacted

would allow for researcher's participation. Secondly this risk can also be minimised by supplementing research with different methodology such as qualitative interviews with individuals from private groups (some people might be willing to have one on one interviews rather than discussing in a group).

#### 4. Discussion

The need for understanding consumer cultures through Netnography has converted the world wide web into a field of research (Kozinets, 2015) in itself. However, while technological progress allows the use of phenomenological methods, there is lack of implementation of such methods due to a gap in processual details of such practices (Mkono et al., 2015). Methodological reflective accounts help in understanding specific details and give a first hand review of the methods used, which is helpful in the adoption of new methods. Also such methodological analysis supports a performative stance in empirical investigations of marketing theories (Mason et al., 2015). This reflective discussion on the ethical dilemmas faced during navigating through the ethical constraints of conducting Netnography provides details of issues faced when researching online groups, blogs and other content. It brings out concerns regarding research design, planning and targeting, required to start any Netnographic research. Such reflection is beneficial for Netnographic researchers seeking ways to make use of performative epistemologies online.

#### References

- Arnould, E. J. & Price, L. L. 1993. River Magic: Extraordinary Experience and the Extended Service Encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(1): 24-45.
- Ateljevic, I., Pritchard, A., & Morgan, N. 2007. *The critical turn in tourism studies*: Routledge.
- Büscher, M. & Urry, J. 2009. Mobile Methods and the Empirical. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12(1): 99-116.
- Butler, G. & Hannam, K. 2012. Independent tourist's automobilities in Norway. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 10(4): 285-300.
- Cadman, L. 2009. Non-representational theory/non-representational geographies. *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, Amsterdam, Elsevier*: 349-380.
- Caton, K. & Santos, C. A. 2007. Heritage Tourism on Route 66: Deconstructing Nostalgia. *Journal of Travel Research*, 45(4): 371-386.
- Csordas, T. J. 1994. *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self*: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. 1954. Structuralism and post-structuralism. *Michel Foucault aesthetics. Essential works of Foucault*, 1984: 433-463.
- Giddens, A., Giddens, A., & Turner, J. H. 1987. Structuralism, post-structuralism and the production of culture. *Social theory today*: 195-223.
- Hackley, C. 2003. 'We Are All Customers Now...' Rhetorical Strategy and Ideological Control in Marketing Management Texts\*. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(5): 1325-1352.
- Harrison, P. 2000. Making sense: embodiment and the sensibilities of the everyday. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18(4): 497-517.
- Kozinets, R. V. 1997. "I Want to Believe": A Netnography of the 'X-Philes' Subculture of Consumption. *Advances in consumer research*, 24: 470-475.
- Kozinets, R. V. 2002. The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *JMR, Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1): 61-72.

- Kozinets, R. V. & Kedzior, R. 2009. I, Avatar: Auto-netnographic Research in Virtual Worlds. *Virtual Social Identity and Consumer Behavior*, 2: 3-19.
- Kozinets, R. V. 2010. *Netnography*: Wiley Online Library.
- Kozinets, R. V. 2015. *Netnography: Redefined*: SAGE.
- Lego, C. K., Wodo, N. T., McFee, S. L., & Solomon, M. R. 2002. A Thirst for the Real Thing in Themed Retail Environments. *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*, 5(2): 61-74.
- Lynch, C. O. 2010. Themed Space. *Communication Teacher*, 24(3): 155-159.
- Mason, K., Kjellberg, H., & Hagberg, J. 2015. Exploring the performativity of marketing: theories, practices and devices. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(1-2): 1-15.
- McGreen, N. & Arnedillo Sánchez, I. 2005. Mapping challenge: A case study in the use of mobile phones in collaborative, contextual learning. *Mobile learning*: 213-217.
- Minkiewicz, J., Evans, J., & Bridson, K. 2013. How do consumers co-create their experiences? An exploration in the heritage sector. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 30(1-2): 30-59.
- Mkono, M., Ruhanen, L., & Markwell, K. 2015. From netnography to autonetnography in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 52(0): 167-169.
- Moeran, B. 2009. From participant observation to observant participation. *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life*: 139-155.
- Nash, C. 2000. Performativity in practice: some recent work in cultural geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 24(4): 653-664.
- Olsen, M. 2003. Tourism themed routes: A Queensland perspective. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 9(4): 331-341.
- Quinlan Cutler, S., Carmichael, B., & Doherty, S. 2014. The Inca Trail experience: Does the journey matter? *Annals of Tourism Research*, 45(0): 152-166.
- Rakić, T. & Chambers, D. 2012. Rethinking the consumption of places. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(3): 1612-1633.
- Tumbat, G. & Belk, R. W. 2013. Co-construction and performancescapes. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 12(1): 49-59.
- Urry, J. 2004. The 'system' of automobility. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21(4-5): 25-39.
- Xun, J. & Reynolds, J. 2010. Applying netnography to market research: The case of the online forum. *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, 18(1): 17-31.
- Zakrisson, I. & Zillinger, M. 2011. Emotions in motion: tourist experiences in time and space. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 15(6): 505-523.