Netnography: Origins, Foundations, Evolution and Axiological and Methodological Developments and Trends

Greiciele M. Morais
Universidade Fumec, greiciele.morais@ufop.edu.br

Valdeci F. Santos
Universidade Fumec, valdeci.santos2354@gmail.com

Carlos A. Gonçalves
Universidade Fumec, carlos11ag@gmail.com

Netnography: Origins, Foundations, Evolution and Axiological and Methodological Developments and Trends

Abstract

Netnography originated in ethnography and evolved following the advances in data transmission technology. The netnographic method is distinguished by its axiological orientation residing in recognition of online social experiences. The main method for data collection adopted by the netnographer is participant observation. One premise that must be observed is the necessary estrangement, which means that the researcher must be a layman as regards the object of study. In the field of administration, netnography emphasized the area of marketing and consumer behavior. The goal is to understand the consumer culture of online communities. One of its main challenges consists of how to conduct ethical research. The current article reviewed the available literature about the netnography method, bringing a brief explanation about its emergence and evolution, as well as its characteristics and application. The article also presents the advantages, challenges, and trends of this modern research method and also suggests topics for future research.

Keywords

Netnography, Virtual Ethnography, Online Community, Research method, Management Research

Creative Commons License

Acknowledgements

Netnography: Origins, Foundations, Evolution and Axiological and Methodological Developments and Trends

Greiciele M. Morais, Valdeci F. Santos, and Carlos A. Gonçalves
Universidade Fumec, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil

Netnography originated in ethnography and evolved following the advances in data transmission technology. The netnographic method is distinguished by its axiological orientation residing in recognition of online social experiences. The main method for data collection adopted by the netnographer is participant observation. One premise that must be observed is the necessary estrangement, which means that the researcher must be a layman as regards the object of study. In the field of administration, netnography emphasized the area of marketing and consumer behavior. The goal is to understand the consumer culture of online communities. One of its main challenges consists of how to conduct ethical research. The current article reviewed the available literature about the netnography method, bringing a brief explanation about its emergence and evolution, as well as its characteristics and application. The article also presents the advantages, challenges, and trends of this modern research method and also suggests topics for future research. Keywords: Netnography, Virtual Ethnography, Online Community, Research Method, Management Research

Introduction

The decade of 1990 was marked by the increase in the population's access to the Internet. Since then, people began to interact more and more through the digital environment, forming cultures, and online communities (Angrosio & Rosenberg, 2001). In this sense, these interactions gained relevance as an object of research (Bowler, 2010). The investigation of these patterns of behavior has developed as a subgroup of traditional ethnographic research, often called "virtual ethnography" or "netnography," a method specifically designed to study online cultures and communities (Toledano, 2017).

Netnography preserves the basis of traditional ethnography but adapts it to the new contingencies mediated by the internet. The procedures for locating online fields for research questions and topics of interest are part of netnography. Moreover, it includes ways to deal with large digital data sets, navigate challenging ethical areas in the online world, and deal with the public intellectual aspects of netnographic participation (Kozinets, 2018). In addition to his perception, the researcher uses technology to understand the behavior of online communities and their interactions.

The method enhances its anthropological base and spreads to disciplines such as education, geography, tourism, technology studies, cultural studies, research on addiction, sexuality, psychology, education, librarianship, sociology, theology, political science, and anthropology, with a growing tendency, in the area of management and business (Kozinets, 2018), in addition to the teaching and learning axes (Hetland & Mørch, 2016). The intersection between Big Data and netnography arises with special interest and utility for management in studies aimed at understanding consumer behavior (Kozinets, 2018). Netnography has advantages in terms of quantity and availability of data when compared to other traditional

research methods, however, it presents challenges and problems that the researcher needs to know (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015), especially conducting ethical research.

The ability to access large amounts of archived interactions online completely changes the practice of ethnography and the social sciences. In this context, netnography is positioned between big data analysis and discourse analysis (Kozinets, 2015). The method stands out today because with the globalization and advancement of technology, data transmission and processing, and popularization of the use of the Internet, much of the social, political and commercial relations are present in the online world, so it is necessary the development and the application of methods consistent with reality. Netnography is the method that enables the understanding of these interactions. As it is considered a modern research method, many researchers still do not have their domain and understanding. Thus arises the need to develop studies that support the dissemination of the method.

The current research is justified by the need for studies that position researchers on the possibilities of this modern research method today. There is a lack of current studies that deal with the topic in detail. As the method develops along with the advancement of technology, it is continually presenting news. Studying the state of the art on the subject contributes to academic knowledge while offering an update of knowledge about the method. Thus, this article aims to explain the netnography method through a literature review. The paper presents the netnography method, addressing its emergence and evolution, its characteristics and typologies, the practices of netnography and the role of the netnographer, the advantages, contributions, challenges, and limitations of netnography as a research method, as well as its trends, and future perspectives.

Research Methodological Procedures

As a methodological approach, the academic literature was reviewed through database searches (Portal of journals CAPES, SPELL, EBSCO HOST, and Google Scholar). We selected works by renowned authors in the field, such as Kozinets (2018) and Hine (2015), but also using literature published in recent years in national and international journals. An explanation of the netnography and its aspects, as previously mentioned, was intended here.

Literature Review

Origin and Evolution of Netnography

Before we deal with the topic netnography, it is necessary to present the method that gave rise to it, the ethnography. Ethnography originated in the nineteenth century when researchers were interested in exploring cultures and races of tribes from outside Europe, focusing on the study of non-primitive and non-industrialized people and cultures through written and record keeping, sometimes using photographic equipment (Rees & Gatenby, 2014).

The 1990s were marked by increased access to the Internet, which nowadays has a variety of functions and utilities. The advancement in the quality of electronic data transmission made it possible for people to interact more frequently, forming cultures and online communities (Angrosio & Rosenberg, 2001). The Internet became an important place for research, with people attending forums, podcasts, social networking sites, videocasting, blogs, newsgroups, photo-sharing communities, and virtual worlds (Bowler, 2010). Thus, investigation on behavior patterns and communication of virtual communities developed as a subgroup of traditional ethnographic research often called "virtual ethnography" or "netnography," a method specifically designed to study online cultures and communities (Toledano, 2017).

According to Corrêa and Rozados (2017), the method was first used by US researchers Bishop, Star, Neumann, Ignacio, Sadunsky, and Schatz in 1995, who used electronic media to track actions of computer users and computer systems, information such as virtual and periodical libraries.

One of the first researchers to use the term "virtual ethnography" was Mason (1996) to describe ethnographic research on virtual interactions, but it can also be complemented with an offline ethnographic approach to understand online behavior. Later, Kozinets (1998) coined the term "netnography," which refers to the ethnographic research of interactions in a completely online manner. The term "online ethnography" was suggested by Markham (1998, 2005) as a method that seeks to understand online behavior through online and offline research, taking into consideration the possibility of complementarity. Thus, it is understood that while online ethnography and virtual ethnography allowed for a combination of online and offline ethnographic approaches to understanding online behaviors, netnography is a entirely online approach.

As social media participation grew, netnography became more widespread in the fields of marketing, business, and management. Although its origin is in the fields of business and management, netnography consists of a broad-based study of social interaction and online experience from a human perspective. The foundation of this method lies in the epistemologies of participant observation of anthropology and the axiologies of cultural understanding of the field, and strongly depends on forms of communication and information technologically mediated and archived, unlike the traditional varieties of ethnography (Hetland & Mørch, 2016). Since the emergence of virtual ethnography, some authors dedicated to researching this theme (Hine, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2015; Kozinets, 1998, 2010, 2015, 2018). Hine (2015) considered virtual ethnography as a topic for research instead of a place to be visited. Already Kozinets (2015) developed his version of virtual ethnography, calling it "netnography," to research communities and cultures online. Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor (2012) focused on online virtual worlds as the locals for ethnographic research and were less concerned with the interaction of online and offline worlds. For Hetland and Mørch (2016), ethnographers must venture into frontier zones where hybrids and non-hybrids meet to conduct empirical research.

The definition of netnography emphasizes that the traditions and techniques methodologically inform both his field work and his textual account of cultural anthropology (Kozinets, 1998). Therefore, contemporary netnography relates the collection, analysis, practice of ethics in research and representation, where a significant amount of data is collected through a participant-observational research posture rather humanistic (Kozinets, 2015). The netnography is based on the perspective of a human being, temporally, historically, and culturally situated with anthropological training. Therefore, it requires cultural understanding, through a more in-depth analysis of the contemporary online experience of people, relating elements such as identity, language, ritual, imagery, symbolism, roles, values, histories, myths, and especially meanings (Kozinets, Scaraboto & Parmentier, 2018).

Thus, netnography collaborates with the idea that human beings must be studied in depth, resisting the tendency to reduce humanity to numbers, decontextualizing its constituent elements and descriptors. Besides, netnography also focuses on the meaning of the human being in a changing world. It focuses on increasingly refined details about exactly how technology changes human experience (Kozinets, 2015). We live in a time when social media companies such as Instagram, Facebook, and Big Data processors seems to offer marketing treasures and research that reveal secrets about everything and open the way to complete monitoring of social control. Given this scenario, netnographers strive to minimize the limits of the research tradition and adapt to situations of constant evolution (Kozinets, Scaraboto & Parmentier, 2018).

In this way, netnography preserves the basis of traditional ethnography but adapts to the new contingencies mediated by the Internet. New practices were needed to narrow the gap between social contexts by including procedures for locating online fields to search for research questions and topics of interest, dealing with large sets of digital data, navigating challenging ethical areas around the world online and deal with the public intellectual aspects of netnographic participation (Kozinet, 2018).

Characteristics and Typologies of Netnography

The netnographic method is considered an extension of ethnography with the differential of an axiological orientation residing in recognition of online social experiences and the corporate colonization of interactions, allied to anthropology (Rhazzali, 2015). In this sense, on the Internet, on cell phones and other devices, there is less and less social space for us to relate to each other outside the logic of the market since this interaction is the target of constant business observation (Kozinets, 2018). In Marketing research, netnography seeks to reveal habits, preferences and meanings, structures and social behaviors, needs and various characteristics that subsidize companies in solving their problems. However, it also analyzes and develops solutions to problems of contemporary society detected through the analysis of social media (Kozinets, 2018).

One premise that must be observed by the netnographer is the necessary estrangement, which means that the researcher must be a layman as regards the object of study (Fetterman, 2009). The method is highlighted by the scientific objective of analyzing and understanding society with its cultural characteristics manifested in social media. Then, netnography works as a method capable of questioning the power structure of corporations, individuals, or groups dominated by technologies (Kozinets, 2018). Therefore, the author stresses the importance of critical checks on the transformation of political, market and personal influence caused by technology and its devices, networks, and practices.

For Kozinets (2010), the netnographic methodology, when compared to ethnography, is much more agile, more economical, and less invasive. It is a research focused on observational participation in the online field. The author also reinforces that in aspects related to reality, authenticity, practicality, adequacy, and holism, netnography did not differ from ethnography since there is no perfection and a real ethnography. Despite that, according to Hetland and Mørch (2016), there are differences between netnography and ethnography that need to be understood: the nature of the interaction is altered; anonymity; accessibility, highlighting online social interaction is a public-private hybrid; instant storage of activities and fieldwork in the media.

Kozinets (2018) established four typologies of netnography, structured in autonetnography, symbolic netnography, digital netnography, and humanistic netnography. Autonetnography focused on autobiographical aspects, for its own identity and history, personal reflections on participation in social networks, with a critical understanding. In the axiological context, autonomy preserves and values a human voice through its first-person perspective.

Another typology is the symbolic netnography that originated from the need of netnography to provide subsidies to managers' decisions. The symbolic netnographies are linked to the decoding of the characteristics and behaviors of the people, and in the marketing area, especially to understand the consumers. Information and interaction with social media contribute to creating a diagnosis of specific sites and a portrait of people, helping to discern and explain their practices, meanings, and values. Thus, promoting a more purposeful understanding that will subsidize the decision-making process (Kozinets, 2018).

Digital netnography uses analytical techniques of statistical data and has a global focus. The phases encompass a range of large masses of social media data in order to detect patterns and construct understandings of cultural elements. The global fields surveyed generally portray the functioning of the infrastructure and influence technological networks. Also, in this method, in later phases, particular aspects that can translate important cultural elements are explored. They produce results that do not question or criticize intensely but tend to collaborate with the reinforcement or improvements of business, management, and social practices (Kozinets, 2018).

The fourth and final typology is humanistic netnography focused on critical research and critical theory, guided by social issues of great importance. Social media data are used to try to promote a discussion and solution to social impact problems (Kozinets, 2015). For Kozinets (2018) one of the relevant and emerging discussions from this method consists in the changing nature of human social existence in the face of globalization and advanced technological change, which requires a systemic view of social media.

The netnographies vary in many ways and manifest their deviations, but the researcher must attend to and treat its deviations in order to maintain trust, authenticity, and a sense of meaning in such an environment. This task of netnography considers its penetration into a world in which, for most scientists, beliefs and preconceptions remain a considerable part of the ideology of scientific practice (Kozinets, 2015).

Practices of Netnography and the Role of the Netnographer

The netnography practices evolved and focused on the use of several search mechanisms to detect social information and their existing interactions. Besides, it uses distinct types of communication channels and controlled interaction spaces for searching groups of people (Kozinets, 2018). According to the same author, one of the search engines that can subsidize netnography is Google, a widely accessible, popular, and familiar tool. Also customized and specialized sites are indicated, which usually take the form of blogs and social networks, such as Facebook.

Data sources, in a netnographic study, are mainly data from interviews, elicited, field notes, and archives. The archives allow the data not to be affected by the netnograph. The data extracted from files is easy to obtain and provides rich observational, audiovisual, graphic and photographic information. In this phase, Kulavuz-Onal (2015) pointed out that it is a challenge to the netnographer the large amount of data available online, regarding the selection, classification, limitation, and analysis of the data.

It is part of the work of the netnographer, examining the broad set of social media, microblogs, applications, and other online communicative sources such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, blogs, and Whatsapp. The refinement of the research data formats and sources by netnographers consists of a critical stage that contributes to the quality definition of research questions, the social and interactional information, and how to respond to the problem of the study (Kozinets, 2018).

The main method for data collection used by the netnographer is participant observation, where the researcher submerges in the daily life of the groups and becomes one of its members as he participates in the activities of his daily life and broadly observes them. Afterward, it conducts a local study where the group lives, performs the fieldwork, collecting a wide variety of materials about this group, making observations and interviewing people formally and informally (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015).

After that, the netnographer tries to understand and transmit the reality of the group through the detailing of their interpretations, with their nuances, culturally based. This

description is familiar to its participants but strange to others. Thus, the task of the netnographer is not to determine the truth but to reveal the manifold truths apparent in the lives of others.

Kozinets (2018) points out that there are debates about what constitutes the netnographer's participation, considering the naturalness of knowledge about culture, community, and participation in the categories of online social context. Thus, Rageh and Melewar (2013), Kulavuz-Onal (2015) and Kozinets (2018) highlight the importance of experience in the online cultural context to make netnography more explanatory than descriptive. Consequently, that immersion and engagement ensure that netnography focused on understanding human, in the meanings, languages, codes, of a group or set of groups, which differentiates netnography from simple data mining.

Another important practice in netnography is the possibility of using elicited data, which can occur in the form of asynchronous communication between the netnographer and the participants, through forums, e-mail communication, or blogs as in the form of synchronous communication, such as Skype interviews (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015).

Thus, the contribution of netnography is in the addition of interpretative insights, with the construction of knowledge through what is published and available on the Internet (Kozinets, 2010). The researcher's interpretation fundamentally contributes to netnography. Kulavuz-Onal (2015) added that the netnographer should record his experiences alongside his observations while participating in online community events and activities in order to discover the experience of a regular member in this community. Figure 1 summarizes the netnographic practices discussed in this topic.

Figure 1 - Netnographic Process
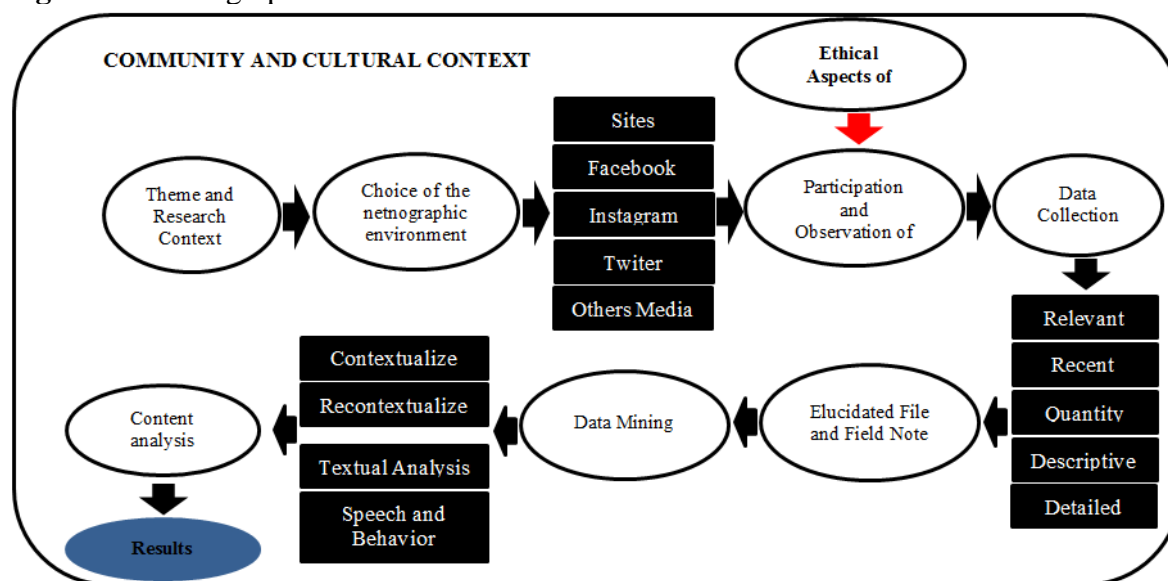
Source: Authors.

The netnographer is sensitive to adapting to the constant changes in practices, commitments, and beliefs. This netnographic sensitivity is about how to tell stories, how to make one's history as a researcher or team, providing an appreciation of one's place in this time and social world (Kozinets, Sacaraboto & Parmentier, 2018). For Reid and Duffy (2018) the netnography practiced through critical analyzes and adaptations to the modern world contribute to avoiding the "digital opportunism." Then, it allows us to reflect on what people are assuming, thinking, and doing and arguing why they are doing it. In this context, netnography may not be such a fast practice, but it needs to be valued in one of the most important and flexible ways to deepen

the understanding and understanding of the nuances of consumer forms, social and cultural contexts, in a complex setting under formation.

Advantages and Contributions of Netnography to the Field of Administration

As a methodology, netnography was also applied extensively in the field of marketing (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015). Netnography, as a research technique, contributed crucially to the understanding of the multiple social and cultural processes that constitute the consumer (Ariztia, 2015). In this field, Big Data brings important contributions, allowing them to go beyond the psychoanalysis of the advertising agency with the sophistication of the algorithms. The researches seek through these techniques and tools to make material the desires of the consumers, reaching the supra-human meaning and contributing to the development of the brand or product (Thomas, Nafus & Sherman, 2018).

The intersection between Big Data and netnography arises with special interest and usefulness for public relations studies of communities and with the community. This combination allows the analysis of the conversational interactions in the online social environment and provide a better understanding of the meanings, motivations, and dynamics of a given community (Rageh & Melewar, 2013).

Therefore, market research becomes more agile and more comprehensive through the use of big data and netnography. Through them, companies map consumer behavior, such as their consumption habits, perception, ways of relating, and use of products or services, topics of interest, where they are located, which other products they consume, and many other information needed for market research. This information allows to identify the possible trends in the behavior of these consumers, i.e. their wants or needs.

Netnography at the service of market research and marketing must follow systematic steps to monitor trends in consumer behavior and, at the same time, diagnose the desired improvement points for these consumers in relation to products / services. In addition, it must make the improvements demanded by consumers through innovation. Netnography is an important research methodology capable to help companies to improve their understanding of consumers, measure the efficiency of their advertising by identifying noise in communication, identifying brand perception in the virtual market and consequently the need to repositioning of the brand, products or services, as well as enabling the identification of new business opportunities.

Netnography and Big Data have revolutionized the practice of market research and, consequently, marketing. This revolution allows companies to follow in real time the possible needs and wants of consumers and even anticipate future needs for products and services. Thus, with a click, a web page access or a typed comment, companies can draw conclusions from customer needs. When a consumer purchases a product, they are automatically hinting at the potential need for other related products. Once a potential consumer need is detected, advertisements are automatically routed, often in a personalized manner.

The fundamental position of netnography as a research method also becomes relevant for digital humanities artists, librarians, information scientists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, marketing practitioners and consumer researchers (Kozinets, Sacaraboto & Parmentier, 2018). The authors added that corporate managers need to develop intro and retrospective skills with the netnographic method and participation in the virtual social environment to instigate new areas of marketing research, leaving aside simplistic readings of positive and negative feelings of abundantly emotional statements or content. By following these principles, netnography can contribute far beyond abstract statistical visions and marketing objectivity.

Understanding and dealing with the expansion of communication technologies, with the importance and impact of social media, influence marketing, and online brand narrative, contribute to relevant advances in managerial practices by developing a notion of autonetnography. Additionally, it also helps to balance the vast amount of data and human cultural sensitivities (Kozinets, Sacaraboto & Parmentier, 2018). The main advantage of netnography, a methodology still under development, is the low cost and ease of access to an extensive amount of material compared to alternative traditional research methods. It allows researchers to collect a relevant number of opinions from a wide range of participants without any effect of the researcher's observation and at a fraction of the cost of alternative methods (Mateos & Durand, 2018). Thus, netnography presents advantages in terms of quantity and availability of data, when compared to other traditional methods of research, however, presents challenges and problems that the researcher needs to know (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015).

Challenges and Limitations of Netnography as a Research Method

The postmodern and constructivist approach is employed in ethnographic research. Many influencers of this approach like Weber, Geertz and Schutz value the study and full description of communities and cultures, the perspectives and experiences of the research participants. But such approaches still receive many critiques related to subjectivity and the risk of bias (Ryan, 2017).

The most prominent disadvantages of netnography are the lack of control over the sampling structure of the study population, as well as the absence of a questionnaire, interview schedule, observation plan, or any research structure or strategy for collection of data (Prior & Miller, 2012). These disadvantages could introduce some source of bias in the results, which could be especially critical when trying to generalize the results to the entire population (Prior & Miller, 2012). Another critical aspect of netnography relies on the impossibility of capturing the range of offline interactions among community members, allowing dissonance between online and offline representations of respondents.

While in most traditional methods, researchers collect information directly from people who consent to its use in research. On netnography, this is not always the case. With the colonization of social media space, corporations and other organizations own the data and may not allow their use in research. In some cases, they may have their own research companies (Kozinets, 2018).

One of the challenges encountered by the researcher is the definition of the boundaries of the research field, which is determined according to the researcher's perception and interest regarding the characteristics of the interactions that occur between the members of groups that become potential objects of study (Kulavuz -Onal, 2015). In this way, the netnographer decides what to include and what not to include when determining the field, i.e., what activities, sites or community interactions he or she wishes to study (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015).

Several guidelines govern the use of data in publications and research reports. Specific source materials, such as blogs, should generally be cited. Depending on the probable amount of risk or harm to research participants, data rewriting is recommended so that it cannot be tracked through input into a search engine. All these boundaries between public and private spaces, legitimate, and illegitimate use and sharing of social media data make ethnography in netnography a difficult, sensitive, and complex subject (Kozinets, 2018).

The researcher's presence on the netnography may not be evident. In this way, people being studied may not even realize that they are the object of the research. Unless they read scholarly journals and recognize these publications, they may never realize that their freely shared conversations were incorporated into research (Kozinets, 2018). In this way, the author indicated that when the researcher is an active participant in a specific site of research interest,

he must honestly and fully disclose his presence, affiliations, and intentions. Netnographers face the challenge of conducting ethical research with the agreement of the online community selected to participate with informed consent. According to Corrêa andRozados (2017), obtaining the consent form by netnographers faces the following complications:

1) User contact information may not be available in profiles;
2) On some platforms, users use pseudonyms or "avatars", which makes it difficult to verify identity;
3) The users may be dispersed in national or even international territory;
4) For logistical reasons, the informed consent form could be sent over the internet, but the validity of the document could be questioned due to the digital format;
5) Submitting written informed consent terms would involve obtaining the postal address of the users in addition to the high cost to the researcher;
6) The number of posts and users could be too large to carry out this bureaucratic process.

For the authors, considering the limits and possibilities offered by the digital context, it seems more prudent to use a form of research publication that allows individuals to at least speak out for or against the use of shared data. In this way, this manifestation would replace the informed consent form individually. Corrêa and Rozados (2017) argue that in the offline context, the need for informed consent is indisputable. However, the authors consider that the simple transposition of this recommendation to another context, without analyzing its singularities, generate many mistakes and obstacles to the advancement of knowledge, especially when it comes to studies conducted with ethnographic approach on the Internet.

As for the singularities of the information of the users of social media platforms, and that they are often aware that their data is publicly available and would not mind providing them, as long as they are aware of its use in the development of research (Corrêa & Rozados, 2017). For Corrêa and Rozados (2017), it should be considered that the intimate issues are not addressed on social networking sites, to the extent that individuals understand these as public spaces. In addition, the authors point out that when registering on a given site, the user must often agree with the privacy policy of the platform, making public the information shared. Thus, participation in these communities has a price, since consumers, for example, are under surveillance and are directed commercially by marketing professionals (Hetland & Mørch, 2016).

In short, Corrêa and Rozados (2017) point out that the biggest challenge facing the netnographer is to choose between conducting research in the traditional ethical molds or seeking ways to adapt to ethical standards to the characteristics of the digital environment. When the researcher chooses to follow the traditional ethical patterns runs the risk of not being able to collect data and information that would enrich his study and allow an expansion of existing knowledge on a given topic. When the researcher chooses to develop his research adapting to the ethical standards characteristic of the digital environment, he runs the risk of incurring some deviation from the ethical principles consolidated in offline research (Corrêa & Rozados, 2017).

We suggest the development of ethical behaviors specific to the netnographic method, which consider the specificities of online interactions and the development of research methods. Online interactions can be classified as public or private content. Thus, the contents considered private should be considered with the need to formalize the informed consent form to be used in research, whether traditional or online. On the other hand, content classified as public could have its authorization process of use simplified, with the declaration of authorization of use of information for research, which could be forwarded to digital media.

As research interactions and methods evolve, we believe that the concepts and principles of research ethics should also evolve and be renewed, according to the new understandings.

The question of data reliability is especially challenging because the netnographer, besides relying on the participation of the members of these groups, must rely on its authenticity, since trust in online research is still a critical factor (Rageh & Melewar, 2013). In this sense, a problem faced by the netnographer is the presence of an increasing number of false profiles. Ramalho and Barroso (2014) point out that the creation of a fake profile follows aspects similar to the creation of a scenic character, by an actor. In this way, the moment of performance of the fake would constitute a kind of suspension of its own identity. Thus, at this time, the statements issued may, or may not, be consistent with the set of beliefs of the personal issuer.

The same authors pointed out the existence of three types of false profiles, being the fake profile, the character profile and the troll. For them, the fake profile would be one that mimics a real person, alive or not. The fake posts would assume, therefore, a tone of possible statement, no matter how absurd or fictional it may be, from the production of the author. A fictitious person inspires the character profile and its origin can be from literature, teledramaturgy, cartoons, films, etc., or even a creation of its own. The character profile also originated only in the social network. Ramalho and Barroso (2014) highlighted that what differentiates him from a fake profile is his lack of correspondence with real people. On the other hand, the troll needs to be seen as an attitude and not as a profile in itself. This is because, it can act from a fake profile, character or real person. At the same time, the troll can be a phase of some profile. Furthermore, a single post can be considered with troll feature. Its main feature is the extreme aggressiveness and the goal of attack, mostly without grounds.

Another question to be observed is the researcher's bias. A characteristic of qualitative methods is the subjectivity of the researcher, which is not different for netnographic research. The researcher needs to be attentive and prepared to deal with the large volume of false information and profiles present in the online environment, which is considered a global concern (Lazer et al., 2018). For this, it is necessary to develop their ability to read scenarios, contexts, and discourses. The netnographic method itself is used by researchers to deal with these false profiles (Ramalho & Barroso, 2014) and information (Conroy, Rubin & Chen, 2015; Shu et al., 2017), supported by the use of technology.

Beyond his perception, the netnographer makes use of technology to understand the behavior of online communities and their interactions. The method stands out today because with globalization and the advancement of technology, data transmission and processing, and the popularization of Internet use, much of the social, political and commercial relations are present in the online world, so it is necessary to develop and apply methods that are consistent with reality. The method presents the researcher with a trade-off between following the ethical principles of traditional research or working with a large amount of data and information without the formal informed consent of the participants. With a large amount of news and fake profiles, netnography faces reliability issues, which can be minimized by using techniques and technologies to detect false news.

In that sense, the In that sense, the ethics is an important, complex topic and requires the researcher to deal with dilemmas and discrepancies such as fallacy, informed consent, privacy concerns, confidentiality, appointment issues, and legal considerations. Therefore, when doing netnography, the researcher will perform a type of disclosure during which he has the opportunity to clarify, exalt, offend, and even harm the participants.

Therefore, Boellstorff et al. (2012) warn researchers that they should consider the ethics of their research impact on their participants with regard to informed consent, institutional risk mitigation, anonymity, fraud, sex and intimacy, compensation, license, and accurate portrayal. According to the authors, with respect to informed consent, the ethnographer deals with the

risk that private information may become public, and it is therefore important to proceed with informed consent and participation on the ongoing research. In addition, it is necessary to mitigate institutional risk, even if the risk is limited. This also includes the different contracts that govern commercial virtual worlds, so the posture of the netnographer should remain unaltered.

According to Boellstorff et al. (2012), ethnographers can also participate in secret ceremonies, observing illegal or questionable activities, or learning about politically sensitive or even dangerous issues. Therefore, defending participants' confidentiality and anonymity is, therefore important, including thinking about internal anonymity and the deductive disclosure of participants (Hetland & Mørch, 2016).

These limitations can be overcome, and for this, Daymon and Holloway (2010) point out that trust is built through the researcher's involvement and interest in its participants and because of their communication skills. The authors pointed out that the building of relationships began in the first stages of the research process when the researcher makes the initial contacts. At this point, he needs to be confident with no pre-judgments and should be careful about his comments.

Daymon and Holloway (2010) point out that while there is the argument that the Internet provides insufficient social clues to allow human elements to be transmitted in interviews, more and more researchers are discovering that meaningful relationships can be developed online.

Trends and Prospects of Netnography

With the emergence of the Internet, online games, and social media, the concept of virtual ethnography or netnography became more common and is likely to develop following the advances in technology (Ryan, 2017). In this way, the rapid development trend of technology represents one of the tensions within netnography (Kozinets, 2018). For the author, netnography is closely linked to the human consciousness project aligned with the anthropology of academic consciousness, as well as adjusted with the notions of the digital arts and humanities, the human sciences of the performing arts.

According to Kozinets (2018), netnography is part of an expansionist tradition that seeks to unite politics, science, spirituality, the cultural and commercial world, the socio-economic spheres, with all their classes, projects, production, and identities as well as all your desires. For Kozinets (2015) netnography offer a way to examine desires in our own lives, individually and collectively. In order for netnography to keep up with advances in technology and the changes of the modern world and remain relevant, the method needs to evolve, which means to stop being just the netnography of newsgroups, chats, blogs, and Twitter (Kozinets, Scaraboto & Parmentier, 2018). The authors consider that contemporary netnographer must regard human connectivity as transforming in an interconnected network environment of people through ever more complex computing and information systems.

Trends are represented by the replacement of the traditional and holistic approach of netnography by researches of specific and particular subjects within the emerging practical fields (Hetland & Mørch, 2016). Authors such as Boellstorff et al. (2012), Rogers (2013), and Kozinets (2018) highlight as essential steps for the future the discrete methods, commercial-communal relations, and team netnography. The netnography improves its anthropological base and spreads to disciplines such as education, geography, tourism, technology studies, cultural studies, research on addiction, sexuality, psychology, education, librarianship, sociology, theology, political science and anthropology, with a tendency to growth in the area of management and business (Kozinets, 2018). The teaching and learning areas are indicated as two other emerging fields of netnography (Hetland & Mørch, 2016).

Future perspectives were highlighted by Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018) in pointing to the great capacity of tool changes such as Big Data and social media in combination. For these authors, the integrated and supported Big Data netnography became a certain factor of positive and negative change in contemporary society. They contribute to local and global social experiments, being able to be responsible for changing behaviors, influencing opinions, including changing the outcome of elections and redirecting the course of history, for a confusion of false news and misinformation, change the future of propaganda and the media which are the basis of many of the most profitable companies in the world by understanding the preferences of these communities. In this scenario, the netnography method presents future trends following the technology advances and keeps society increasingly connected.

Final Considerations

The current study sought to explore and explain the method of netnography research, addressing its emergence, evolution, application, characteristics, advantages, limitations, challenges, and trends for the future. This article contributed to the theory, bringing a collection of concepts and definitions about netnography and its possibilities as a research method.

Netnography is a modern research method that is increasingly used both in academia and business. The method has the advantage of working with a large amount of data very quickly. The great challenge of the netnographer is to research the ethical principles recommended for traditional research methods, especially regarding the need to obtain the consent form signed by research participants. Another difficulty faced is the identification and differentiation between public and private information, true and false, and true and false profiles present on the Internet.

Our study presents a model for processing the processes of netnographic research, which follows the ethical precepts enshrined in traditional research. For studies that use a large amount of online data, researchers often run the risk of not meeting some of the established ethical principles, such as informed consent. This study also points to the need to develop principles and regulations to be explicitly applied to research conducted online, or that their specificities be considered in the regulations made for traditional methods. The article presents a flow suggestion for netnographic research, which considers the ethical aspects of research and also the specificities of the type of interaction and the research method, encouraging discussion on the topic.

The limitation of this study consists in the lack of deepening of the theme, that, in some aspects, remained a superficial discussion. There is still a need for more profound discussions on regulations and consolidated understandings about ethics in research, bodies responsible for ethical guidance, and the understanding and updating of such documents. The study also does not go into the techniques and technologies that currently exist and that are essential for the identification of profiles and false information.

As the main challenge for netnographic studies is the ethical aspect, we suggest that studies be developed dealing in a detailed and in-depth manner with the ethical aspects of netnographic research. These studies may detail the practice of researchers in different countries in relation to ethical aspects. They can also review the regulations governing research ethics and the bodies responsible for approving and enforcing them. In this way, models for the development of ethical research can be developed. Another line to be followed for future research is the techniques and technologies used to detect profiles and false news. This line can also develop proposals of procedures for the composition of ethical netnographic research models. Another indication is the realization of works that contain examples of studies that used the method as a basis, as well as studies that approach in a deeper way the relationship and the possibilities of the combination between netnography and Big Data.

As social, commercial, and political interactions are increasingly present in the online environment, we suggest to professionals who deal with market research, to develop the practice of netnographic studies for their advantages over traditional methods, namely, lower cost, the possibility of working with more data, information and participants. Netnography is also suitable for marketing professionals, as it is a state-of-the-art method that, together with Big Data tools, can provide an understanding of consumer behavior, demands, and needs. Another possibility of netnography is the development of the perception of brand strength in the market, acceptance of products, measurement of the efficiency of your advertising with the identification of communication noises, identification of brand perception in the virtual market and consequently the need to reposition the brand, products or services, in addition to enabling the identification of new business opportunities.

Netnography allied to Big Data should be applied continuously and systematically to monitor market demands. In this way, companies will be more likely to identify needs to make improvements in their products or services, opportunities for the development of new products or services, and even expand or reconfigure their business.

References

Angrosio, M. & Rosenberg, J. (2001). Chapter 28: Observations on observation: Contingencies and challenges in Atkinson. In P. Coffey, A. Delamont, S. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 467-478). London, UK: SAGE Publications

Ariztia, T. (2015). Unpacking insight: How consumers are qualified by advertising agencies. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 15*(2), 143-162.

Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bowler, G. M. Jr. (2010). Netnography: A method specifically designed to study cultures and communities online. *The Qualitative Report, 15*(5), 1270-1275. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss5/13

Conroy, N. J., Rubin, V. L., & Chen, Y. (2015). Automatic deception detection: Methods for finding fake news. Proceedings of the *Association for Information Science and* Technology, 52(1), 1-4.

Corrêa, M. V., & Rozados, H. B. F. (2017). A netnografia como método de pesquisa em Ciência da Informação [Netnography as a research method in Information Science]. *Encontros Bibli: revista eletrônica de biblioteconomia e ciência da informação, 22*(49), 1-18.

Daymon, C., & Holloway, I. (2010). *Qualitative research methods in public relations and marketing communications*. Routledge.

Fetterman, D. M. (2009). *Ethnography: Step-by-step* (Vol. 17). Sage Publications.

Hetland, P., & Mørch, A. I. (2016). Ethnography for investigating the Internet. *Seminar.Net*, *12*(1), 1.

Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. Sage.

Hine, C. (2005). *Virtual methods: Issues in social research on the Internet*. Berg Publishers.

Hine, C. (2008). *Virtual ethnography: Modes, varieties, affordances*. The SAGE handbook of online research methods, 257-270.

Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Kozinets, R. V. (1998). On netnography: Initial reflections on consumer research investigations of cyberculture. In M. Brucks (Ed.), *Advances in consumer research* (Vol. 25, pp. 366-371).

Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*. Sage publications.

Kozinets, R. V. (2015). Netnography: understanding networked communication society. In C.

Willig, & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of psychology*, (pp. 374-380) Thoousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V. (2018). Management netnography: The art and science of online cultural business research. In C. Cassell, A. Cunliffe, & G. Grandy, (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative business and management research methods*. London, UK: SAGE.

Kozinets, R. V., Scaraboto, D. & Parmentier, M. A. (2018). Evolving netnography: How brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-thanhuman netnography can transform your research, *Journal of Marketing Management, 34*(3-4), 231-242

Kulavuz-Onal, D. (2015). Using netnography to explore the culture of online language teaching communities. *Calico Journal*, 32(3), 426-448.

Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F. & Schudson, M. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science, 359*(6380), 1094-1096.

Markham, A. N. (1998). *Life online: Researching real experience in virtual space, ethnographic alternatives*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira.

Markham, A. N. 2005. The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography. In N. K. Denzin (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 793–820). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Mason, B. L. (1996). Moving toward virtual ethnography. *American Folklore Society News, 25*(2), 4-6.

Mateos, P., & Durand, J. (2012). Residence vs. ancestry in acquisition of Spanish citizenship: A netnography approach. *Migraciones Internacionales, 6*(4), 9-46.

Prior, D. D., & Miller, L. M. (2012). Webethnography: Towards a typology for quality in research design. *International Journal of Market Research*, 54(4), 503-520.

Rageh, A., & Melewar, T. C. (2013). Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 16*(2), 126-149.

Ramalho, A., & Barroso, F. (2014). Fakes no twitter: Um estudo sobre um fake político no Distrito Federal [Fakes on twitter: A study on a political fake in the Federal District]. *Comunicologia-Revista de Comunicação da Universidade Católica de Brasília, 7*(2), 03-26.

Rees, C. & Gatenby, M. (2014). Critical realism and ethnography. In P. K. Edwards, J. O'Mahoney, & S. Vincent (Eds.), *Studying organizations using critical realism: A practical guide* (pp. 132-147). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Reid, E. & Duffy, K. (2018). A netnographic sensibility: Developing the netnographic/social listening boundaries. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *34*(3-4), 263-286.

Rhazzali, K. (2015). Islam online: A netnography of conversion. *Leiden annual review of the sociology of religion: Religion and internet* (pp. 164-182). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

Rogers, R. (2013). *Digital methods*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.

Ryan, G. S. (2017). An introduction to the origins, history and principles of ethnography. *Nurse Researcher, 24*(4), 15-21.

Shu, K., Wang, S., & Liu, H. (2017). Exploiting tri-relationship for fake news detection. ArXiv, abs/1712.07709.

Thomas, S. L., Nafus, D. & Sherman, J. (2018). Algorithms as fetish: Faith and possibility in algorithmic work. *Big Data & Society*, *5*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717751552

Toledano, M. (2017). Emergent methods: Using netnography in public relations research. *Public Relations Review*, *43*(3), 597-604.

Author Note

Greiciele Macedo Morais is currently a PhD student in Business Administration at FUMEC University. Studied a Master of Business Administration (2016) and an MBA in Strategic Business Management (2015) at Universidade Fumec. Acts as administrator at the Federal University of Ouro Preto. Interested in research on e-commerce, big data, consumer behavior, public management, planning and public governance. Correspondence can be addressed directly to: greiciele.morais@ufop.edu.br.

Valdeci Ferreira dos Santos is currently a PhD student in Business Administration at Fumec University. Studied a Master of Business Administration (2017) and an MBA in Strategic Business Management (2015) at FUMEC University. He served as administrator at the Minas Gerais Sanitation Company (COPASA). He currently works as an administrator at the Federal University of Ouro Preto. Interested in research on eCommerce, Big Data, Consumer Behavior, Public Management, Planning and Competitiveness. Correspondence can also be addressed directly to: valdeci.santos5@bol.com.br.

Carlos Alberto Gonçalves completed his doctorate in Business Administration from the University of São Paulo (USP), 1986; Master's in Computer Science from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC / RJ), 1976. He was a professor at the Department of Computer Science at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), in the area of Basic Software and Computational Mathematics. He is currently a Full Professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) and a Holder at the Minas Gerais Culture Foundation, FUMEC University. He works in Administration with emphasis on Organizational Strategy Theories, Marketing, Innovation Systems, New Research Methods in Management and Applied Neuroscience. Correspondence can also be addressed directly to: carlos@face.ufmg.br.

Article Citation

Morais, G. M., Santos, V. F., & Gonçalves, C. A. (2020). Netnography: Origins, foundations, evolution and axiological and methodological development and trends. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(2), 441-455. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss2/10