

The Field Behind the Screen: Using the Method of Netnography To Research Market-Oriented Virtual Communities

ABSTRACT

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has fostered cybercultures and virtual communities, many of which are market-oriented in their focus. This article develops netnography as an online ethnographic technique for market research. Netnographic techniques are adapted to the social technomediation, open participation in social groups and accessibility of social information that characterize CMC. Netnography presents flexible guidelines for conducting online fieldwork that adaptively address central ethnographic concerns of cultural entrée, fieldnotes, trust and rapport, interviews, ethics, member checks and cultural exit as well as the representation of research.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is not about technology, it is not about information, it is about communication—people talking with each other, people exchanging e-mail, people doing the low ASCII dance. The Internet is mass participation in fully bi-directional, uncensored mass communication. Communication is the basis, the foundation, the radical ground and root upon which all community stands, grows and thrives. The Internet is a community of chronic communicators (Strangelove 1994).

Networked computing is ushering in important transformations of social formations that are of interest to scholars in diverse disciplines (Jones 1999). As methodological tools are being applied to understanding market-oriented choice during computer-mediated communication (CMC) and market exchange (see, e.g., Alba et al 1997, Hoffman and Novak 1996), it is important to also account for the often communal and cultural nature of the networked computing environment. Surveys on adults who use online services indicate that 75% of them use e-mail, 64% of them use their computers to get information on a hobby or personal interest, 36% access newsgroups and 25% visit chat rooms (USA Today 1996). People use networked computers for social relating and whether termed “virtual communities” (Rheingold 1993), “brand communities” (Muniz 1997), “communities of interest” (Armstrong and Hagel 1996, Hagel and Armstrong 1997) or “Internet cultures”(Jones 1995), research reveals that online groups are often market-oriented in their interests. Their numbers and diversity are also growing rapidly (e.g., Jones 1999).

Cultural conventions and technologies are evolving rapidly and in concert to produce increasingly accessible and sophisticated symbolic interfaces for these market-oriented virtual communities. However, market researchers and others in the social sciences currently have few conceptualizations of how these environments differ from face-to-face settings and from one another. They also have a weak appreciation of some of the radical conceptual discontinuities in social formation these developments represent. Consequently, they lack prescriptions regarding the utility of extant research procedures within, and the possible necessity of new and distinctly adapted

research procedures for, these new environments.

The role of “humanistic methods” of inquiry that emphasize researcher immersion, idiographic knowledge, emergent or grounded theory, and interpretive analysis has been successfully established by Hirschman (1986) and many others (e.g., Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988). “Market-oriented ethnography” has been detailed as a type of humanistic inquiry that focuses on the behavior of people constituting a market for a product or service (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). This article builds on these important foundations by theorizing some fundamental differences between the market-oriented behavior of people in online and offline environments. It develops *netnography* as a discontinuous innovation in methodology for researchers interested in the investigation and representation of market-oriented virtual communities. Extant and innovative methodological practices will be marshaled to conceptualize the conduct of online ethnographic research and its representation. Several illustrative examples will be presented throughout. A final section explores general conclusions, and considers the implications of netnography and market-oriented virtual communities for market research.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Virtual Community and Cyberculture

Every day, millions of people use CMC to share cultural information and build cultural formations. These online formations may be said to manifest culture, the “learned beliefs, values, and customs that serve to order, guide, and direct the behavior of a particular society or group” (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, p. 485 f.2; see also Geertz 1973). The term given to the shared meanings and practices that order and guide social formations distinctively concerned with, or manifesting through, technologies of computing or networked computing is *cyberculture*.¹ Cyberculture both exists within and interpenetrates wider cultural and social meanings and practices, or “macroculture” (McCracken 1997, Thompson 1997), including the economic realm of

markets (Venkatesh 1998).² The complex meanings and practices that constitute it originate not only in embodied sociocultural and psychological needs, but also in the distinct traditions, constraints and trajectories of computer culture. As Laurel (1990, p. 93) noted, all virtual communities exist as “villages of activity within the larger cultures of computing.” Cyberculture has been widely recognized as an important new locus of human cultural and economic activity (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) deserving distinct methodological development (Hakken 1999, Jones 1999). Escobar (1994, p. 218) noted that “research in this area is just beginning. We can anticipate active discussion on the proper methods of studying these communities, including questions of on-line/off-line fieldwork, the boundaries of the groups to be studied, interpretation, and ethics.” Komito (1998, p. 104) has suggested that the larger online ‘society’ of various virtual communities be termed “net culture.” This relationship between macroculture, cyberculture, net culture and virtual communities is depicted in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

“Virtual community” (Rheingold 1993) is the term most commonly used to refer to online social gatherings and has prompted considerable debate (e.g., Jones 1995, 1999).³ Komito (1998) has demonstrated that the term community, as used in discussion about virtual communities, can refer variously to a moral, normative, intentional or proximate community, a community of interest, or a community of practice. Hamman (1998) has detailed the inconsistency, ambiguity and frequent incoherence of the term community in the sociological vocabulary. This may be due to the wide variation of communities that exist, an observation that Komito (1998) interprets as suggesting that CMC groups can be considered communities, and should be studied using extant social science concepts and methods.

The nature of the distinction between the virtual or online and the “real” has also been

explored and problematized (e.g., Hakken 1999, Hamman 1996, Kendall 1999, Komito 1998, Surratt 1998, Turkle 1995). Online activity is discursive, but, as Benedict Anderson (1983) demonstrated, many “imagined communities” such as nations, are actively constituted through discourse. Cultural formations are similarly founded on communication (Carey 1989). Therefore it should be unsurprising that virtual communities possess an as-if-real ontological status many of their participants and, thus, can have consequential effects on many aspects of social behavior, including marketplace behavior (Armstrong and Hagel 1996, Hagel and Armstrong 1997, Surratt 1998).

Some past research into online social behavior arguably applied extant theoretical frameworks and methodologies with insufficient regard for the differences between online and face-to-face environments. Initial research based in social psychological theory, and experimentally tested, indicated that the online medium provided an impoverished basis for social activity. Social activity requires the conveyance of rich socioemotional information, social presence and social structure and, compared to with face-to-face (or “f2f,” see Glossary provided in Table 1) exchanges, online communications were theorized to be “lean” and equivocal (e.g., Daft and Lengel 1986). Communicants were presumed to suffer from *reduced social cues*, the online medium’s reduced capacity to transmit nonverbal information relevant to social presence such as voice inflection, accents, facial expressions, directions of looking, gaze-meeting, posture, proxemics, and touching (e.g., Sproull and Kiesler 1986; Short, Williams and Christie 1976). Hence, the online environment was seen as a forum prompting task-oriented, “impersonal,” “inflammatory,” “cold,” and “unsociable” interactions (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire 1984; Siegel et al. 1986; Sproull and Kiesler 1986; Walther 1992, p. 58-9).

Insert Table 1 About Here

Contrasting with these experimentally-based conclusions, *in situ* naturalistic or ethnographic research has revealed the richly detailed and personally-enriching social worlds articulated by online groups (e.g., Baym 1995; Correll 1995; Hamman 1996, 1998; Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Lea and Spears 1995; Myers 1987; Paccagnella 1997). Walther (1992, p. 53) summarily notes that “the characterizations of CMC born from experiments on groups seem contradictory to the findings of CMC in field studies.” Online ethnography reveals social groups whose members “develop an ability to express missing nonverbal cues in written form” (Rice and Love 1987, p. 89; see also Davis and Brewer 1997, Herring 1999, Myers 1987, Turkle 1995). In computer-mediated communication, contextualizing affection, affiliation and metacommunicative cues take the form of electronic “paralanguage” such as “relational icons” or “emoticons” [e.g., pictographic alphanumeric symbols intended to be read on their side as a human face, such as 8) a smiling face with glasses, or ;-) a winking face], intentional misspellings, lexical surrogates for vocal segregates, spatial arrays, grammatical markers, absence of corrections, and capitalization, as well as visual ASCII art (see. e.g., McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith 1995; Walther 1992). Similar attempts to imbue textual messages with features intended to replicate a face-to-face communication are common among users of other media (Beninger 1987).⁴ Ethnographic investigation has enriched prior social psychology-based portrayals of online interaction by problematizing the reduced social cues theory, whose evidence was largely based on short-term experimental studies of asynchronous “zero history” or “one-shot” groups. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that *in situ* ethnographic investigations of online market-oriented behaviors can complement and enhance other market research approaches to this phenomenon. Researching these online market-oriented behaviors requires an appreciation of their differences from face-to-face behaviors. This is the topic to which the next section of this article now turns.

Characterizing Computer-Mediated Communication

Netnography can be defined as a fusion of established and innovative ethnographic techniques adapted to the naturalistic study of virtual communities, and their research representation. In order to adapt the techniques of face-to-face anthropological fieldwork to the online environs, a necessary initial step is to specify the often radical differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated social interaction. These differences can –and have—been conceptualized in a variety of ways. Emphasizing the process of communication, Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988) theorized that CMC possessed five major characteristics: interactivity, asynchronicity, channel segmentation, mechanomorphism, and lack of sensory data. Emphasizing textual properties, Mitra and Cohen (1999) describe CMC on the World Wide Web as characterized by: intertextuality (e.g., hyperlinks), nonlinearity, the reader acting also as writer, multimedia aspects, global properties, and impermanence. Several overriding themes can be consolidated from these conceptualizations. For the methodological purposes of this paper, it is useful to conceptualize computer-mediated interactions as differing significantly from face-to-face interactions in: (1) the variously constraining and liberating effects of computer mediation on the nature of social representation, (2) the opportunities present for persons to participate in various social groups and (3) the accessibility of social information. Before exploring their methodological import and impact on established ethnographic procedures, this article discusses these important differences, summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Computer-Mediation of Social Representation. Avoiding the simplistic causality of technological determinism means acknowledging computer-mediated interactions as highly complex additions to and alterations of the social landscape. Anthropologists have been attuned to

the “possibility of radically different discourse patterns” that justifies the ethnography of CMC (Escobar 1994; Hakken 1999, p. 60). Technical aspects of the communicative medium create a distinctly new and, at least originally, obtrusive and opaque cultural experience (see, e.g., Davis and Brewer 1997, Herring 1999, Hiltz and Turoff 1978, Jones 1995, Lea and Spears 1995, Myers 1987). Rapid technological changes cause modes of online social configuration and its supporting technologies to change frequently. Combined with the rapid entry and turnover of participants, the result is a much more rapidly changing social environment.

Compared to the instantaneous nature of face-to-face communications, bandwidth and technological limitations create the characteristic of time lag. “Computer-mediated groups take longer to communicate than face-to-face groups,” correspondingly taking longer to form into cohesive groups (Walther 1992, p. 61). Particularly evident in asynchronous (“time delayed”) CMC media such as bulletin boards and newsgroups, but even in synchronous (“real time”) media such as chat rooms, MUDs, MOOs, and multiplayer game sites, online communications tend not only to be more elongated than face-to-face communications, but more fragmented – messages suffer interruptions, lapses and sporadic frequency (Davis and Brewer 1997, Herring 1999, Surratt 1998). The result is an altered temporal topography. Greater investments of time may be required in order to gain the information and comfort necessary for psychological intimacy (Lea and Spears 1995). Paradoxically, however, the technology simulates the “apparent intimacy of face-to-face connection” in the absence of conventional human patterns of trust-building (Hakken 1999, p. 60).

The second social consequence of bandwidth limitations is the obtrusiveness of the format of social exchange that, in most current CMC, takes place as *textualized communication*. There is considerable irony in this for anthropologists, who have long debated whether culture can be reduced to a text, and an array of novel practical ramifications. Connecting primarily through the written word forces the learning of additional codes and norms, such as emoticons and specialized

language, in order to transfer some of the embodied emotional information vital to cement social relations. While networked computing challenges people to overcome it and communicate in ways that feel more natural (Daft and Lengel 1986; Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire 1984), it also opens opportunities for new modes of expression and interaction (Herring 1999). Implied privacy and textuality confer experiences of anonymous expression and search that may be highly liberating (Short, Williams and Christie 1976; Witmer 1997). Identity thus assumes a new flexibility. There is more strategic control over self-presentation (Lea and Spears 1995, Myers 1987).

CMC simplifies and renders mutable social processes in which people create a “front” that includes emotions, appearance, manner, and physical or “stage props” (Goffman 1959). CMC provides many more opportunities for identity experimentation and the shifting between multiple identities (see, e.g., Turkle 1995). Virtual community can provide forums for reversion of gender, or ungendered being, and even the social inhabiting of imaginative nonhuman bodies (Jones 1995, Hamman 1996). Anonymity combines with imagination in ways that allow the exhibition of characteristics and desires that might be difficult, socially unacceptable, or illegal to express under other contexts (Witmer 1997), as the massive success of cybersex chat rooms, online pornography, erotic web-cams, subversive Internet diatribes, and ultra-violent online games demonstrate. A seventy-year-old man that I interviewed admitted to being “addicted” to violent multi-player computer games, and kept this consumption compulsion a secret from his friends and family who “wouldn’t understand.” This example demonstrates that online expressions of identity and taste may be construed as in some ways more revelatory of individuals’ ‘true,’ (i.e., hidden from others) selves and intentions than the prosaic observation of everyday life and consumption might divulge.

Opportunities for Social Group Participation. Computer-mediated connection levels a variety of social playing fields, granting many more opportunities for participation (Chenault 1998). Once individuals clear the important financial and technical hurdles required for aptitude at

computer-mediated search and communication, participation in an unprecedentedly wide array of social groups is possible. Although not explicitly treated in this article, financial and technical hurdles can be very important obstacles affecting the power and access to technology of many people in developing economies, and in less privileged socio-economic strata.

The participatory, egalitarian ethic of the Internet originated in its gestation period as ARPANET, a DOD-sponsored outgrowth of the academic community whose ethos became “information should be free” (Castells 1996, p. 353-354). Online social interactions manifest this ethos through the general inclusiveness of most social groupings. Many groups offer open membership. The widespread availability of FAQs (“frequently asked questions”) to guide those unfamiliar with the group or the marketplace activity (“newbies”) also demonstrates this ethos of openness. Although gaining acceptance and status in online groups is still knowledge- and norm-dependent (see, e.g., Paccagnella 1997, Baym 1995, Jenkins 1995), most virtual communities are accessible to anyone with the proper equipment, technical knowledge and an attitude of polite openness. Moreover, this is a heretofore unheard of *global accessibility* in which the social gathering of geographically dispersed participants is possible.⁵

Accessibility of Social Information. Online, social information is inscribed and archived, automatically (Donath, Karahalios and Viégas 1999), and made widely accessible. Low information storage costs and efficient search and retrieval technologies make possible the transcendence of many of the temporal and spatial limitations of face-to-face social interaction. For example, search engines make accessible every interaction or every posting on a given topic to a specific newsgroup, every topic in a particular newsgroup, every message in a particular message thread or every posting by a given individual to any newsgroup. Chat room and multi-user dungeon interactions can be captured in their entirety as they take place. The physical analogy would be to have access to recordings of every public social contact in a given cultural formation, or every public social

contact of a specified individual. With search costs vastly reduced, problem sets across the board change from the collection of information to coping with the hypertext cascade ensuing from even the most cursory search.

Online social interaction is therefore a unique *public-private hybrid* never before encountered in human history. Changes in capitalism, social thought and new technologies have imploded the boundaries between home and workplace (and production and consumption). CMC offers ordinary people access to a mass medium, a stage before a global audience. The Internet “is the first medium that combines all the powers to reach a large audience that you see in broadcasting and newspapers with all the intimacy and multi-directional flow of information that you see in telephone calls. It is both intimate and powerful” (Mike Goodwin cited in Davis 1998, p. 263). Opportunities abound not only to broadcast one’s own private information, but also to partake publicly in the private information of others, and also to commoditize and commercialize these relationships. This exhibitionism is taken to the extreme with popular trend of (often for-profit) personal “webcams”: continuously-broadcasting cameras placed in one’s previously private space (workspace, family rooms and bedrooms are common areas for placement).

Summary: Cyberspace as Field. These three sets of characteristics –the computer mediation of social representation, increased opportunities for social group participation, and the accessibility of social information—are fundamental to our understanding of the differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. Employing them as guiding principles, we can now proceed to apply them to extant ethnographic field methods in order to develop a methodology adequately tailored to the unique cultural contingencies of the online environs. The resulting procedures can be advantageously employed to investigate and represent online market-oriented behaviors such as word-of-mouth discussions of product meanings and quality, online recommendations of particular products or services, or the use or purchase of products or services

online.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND NETNOGRAPHY

Ethnography refers both to (1) fieldwork, or the study of the distinctive meanings, practices and artifacts of particular human groupings, and (2) the representations based on such a study (see, e.g., Fetterman 1989, Hakken 1999, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Jorgensen 1989, Lincoln and Guba 1985). Ethnographers employ broad and structured participative, observational and interview methods. They subsequently communicate and represent the understandings obtained by their analysis to test theories, answer questions, and inform understandings. Nearly all ethnographers use common field procedures. These procedures structure researchers' participant-observation and generally include: (1) cultural entrée, (2) writing observational and reflective fieldnotes and gathering other data, (3) gaining cultural formation members' trust and rapport, (4) conducting interviews, (5) ensuring research ethics through receiving informed consent, (6) providing opportunities for the feedback of culture members and (7) exiting the culture. Thorough accounts of these procedures exist for ethnographies conducted in face-to-face situations (see, e.g., Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Fetterman 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Hirschman 1986, p. 240-243; Jorgensen 1989, Lincoln and Guba 1985). Yet the distinctive qualities of computer-mediated communications in the online environment uniquely inflect all of these field research procedures.⁶

This article discusses the adaptations and choices of fieldwork procedures indicated by an analysis of the differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated social interaction. Because ethnography also comprises representation, this is followed by a discussion of online representational procedures and options. The article draws on my own research conducted among on-line media fan and multi-player game-playing communities. Other online ethnographies are referenced in order to demonstrate the general principles of netnography, and to contrast the range of available methodological choices. The entire discussion is summarized in Table 3 and detailed in

the sections that follow.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Entrée

As an initial step, researchers must decide upon the extent and necessity of online versus offline cultural research. Netnography may prove especially useful for two types of investigations. Initially, it might be found useful as a stand-alone methodology applied to study net cultures, cybermarkets (Venkatesh 1998), online marketing, and variants of market-oriented behavior that manifest exclusively through CMC (e.g., online games, multi-user domains, chat rooms, e-commerce communities such as eBay). Secondly, netnography might be found useful as a methodological tool, an adjunct to offline research, applied to investigations of variants of culture, marketing, and market-oriented behavior that have important –but not exclusive—CMC components (e.g., computer use, book shopping, music distribution, newsgroups devoted to Harley-Davidson motorcycles; see, e.g., Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Netnography may also be useful as an exploratory tool used to examine a vast range of general marketing and consumer research—although in these cases care must be taken regarding the “social specificity” (Jenkins 1995) of netnographic informants, and therefore the potential usefulness and transferability of research findings.

Once the utility or necessity for netnography has been established, decisions must be rendered regarding the type of fieldwork to be performed. In her research on “identity in the age of the Internet,” Turkle (1995, p. 22) spent a decade observing and participating “in settings, physical and virtual, where people and computers come together,” and talked to “more than a thousand people.” Her methodology incorporated observation of *in situ* interaction, construction of detailed fieldnotes, informal conversation and long interviews. Because her research emphasized “the relationship between the virtual and the real,” she chose to report only on findings in which she

“met the Internet user in person rather than simply in persona” (ibid, p. 324). Kendall (1999) also emphasized the interrelation of online interaction with embodied, physical interaction in her research on the contextualization and localized spatial properties of an online community. For her research, she combined three years of participant observation in “BlueSky,” an interactive, text-only forum known as a multi-user dungeon (MUD), with thirty face-to-face interviews, participation in face-to-face gatherings, and reading of related newsgroups and e-mail lists (ibid, p. 58). A similar procedure of online, telephone and in-person interview “triangulation” was followed by Correll (1995) in her study of an online “electronic bar.”

Other researchers have deployed very different tactics. The hybrid public-private nature of the online experience and the textual character of social participation within it create an environment in which observation can be largely uncoupled from participation. Online fieldwork can therefore encompass unobtrusive observation of online groups and their interactions, an online activity popularly designated “lurking.” Lurking, and downloading files can be performed by the researcher as the prelude to a more participatory cultural entree, or may in itself constitute the whole of the fieldwork. For instance, in Herzog, Dinoff and Page’s (1997) investigation of one list (Animal Rights-Talk) from 1991 to 1995, they stress their observer-only status, adding as a note that they “never participated in the conversations so as not to influence the course of the discussions” (p. 402). They initially downloaded over four thousand posts, but then “found this amount of data overwhelming.” Subsequently, they decided to focus their analysis on 293 distinct messages posted between August 12, 1992 and February 26, 1993. Jenkins (1995, p. 53) similarly studied one newsgroup, during one particular period of time: the “commentary circulated by one discussion group, alt.tv.twinpeaks, during the fall of 1990....” (see also Baym 1995, Clerc 1996). Comparing lurking netnography to focus groups and commenting on its potential contribution to media studies, Jenkins (1995, p. 52-53) explained:

Ethnographic research has often been criticized for its construction of the very audience it seeks to examine, via the organization and structuring of focus groups, rather than engaging with the activity of pre-existing cultural communities as they conduct their daily lives (the focus of more traditional forms of ethnography). Here, the computer net groups allow us to observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community as it conducts its normal practices of forming, evaluating, and debating interpretations. These discussions occur without direct control or intervention by the researcher, yet in a form that is legitimately open to public scrutiny and analysis.

Often, however, observational techniques are insufficient for investigating particular market-oriented research questions, necessitating a more active form of cultural participation. Establishing cultural contact through participation requires considerable effort on the part of the netnographer to mobilize for fieldwork. This involves, at minimum: (1) identification of online forums appropriate to the types of market research questions that are of interest, (2) definition and location of cultural group or groups that are to be topics of investigation, and (3) learning as much as possible about the forums, the groups, and the individual participants. As Hakken (1999, p. 58) notes, “In cyberspace, the site problem is as much conceptual as ‘geographic.’”

Different presumptions regarding cyberspace as an ethnographic site facilitate different investigative outcomes. Cyberspace itself might be identified as a site. Activities in cyberspace might be presumed to be prototypical, representative, or ‘representative enough’ (Hakken 1999)—presumptions that should have some empirical justification. As well, different site choices facilitate the achievement of different research objectives. Structurally, at least five different types of virtual communities can be distinguished: (1) boards, which function as electronic bulletin boards (also called usenets or newsgroups), (2) rings, composed of thematically-linked World Wide Web pages, (3) lists (also called listservs, after the software program), extended mailing lists united by common themes, (4) dungeons (also called MUDs, MOOs, or MUSEs) which are themed virtual locations in which real-time (synchronous) interactions are structured by role-playing rules and aspects of the programmed environs (e.g., using a medieval fantasy theme, or using multi-player game software)

and (5) rooms (or chat rooms), which are unthemed virtual locations in which real-time social interactions occur, loosely organized around common interests or objectives.⁷ These different types of virtual communities can be arranged by their social structure and primary focus (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 About Here

The interactions of people in rooms and dungeons may be useful to market researchers interested in their particular topics (e.g., hip-hop music, *Warcraft III*), or in their technologies (e.g., the graphical environment or server software of online games). The information conveyed by these groups is, however, often social and relational in nature. Many market researchers will find the generally more focused and more information-laden content provided by the members of boards, rings and lists to be more useful to their investigation. All of the forums, however, can provide useful access to people self-segmented by a certain type of market-orientation, which researchers can translate into private ('one-on-one') online, real-time interviews (see, e.g., Hamman 1996). Yet the exact constitution and focus of particular online forums will, in concert with the scope and focus of the particular research questions under investigation, influence site and entrée decisions.

Although there is no clear-cut "natural" site for online fieldwork, and no single appropriate manner for entering the field (Hakken 1999), these decisions will be facilitated by the low search costs of the CMC environment, which facilitate a more comprehensive inventory of online groups than might be possible in face-to-face social circumstances. Before initiating contact, the boundaries of the groups to be studied should be generally clear –whether this occurs through a tracking of group membership, monitoring of the group's distinctive and defining market-oriented behaviors, interests and language, or even investigation of its distinctive network of members or links. Beyond structural elements, each virtual community possesses foci of interest and other shared social characteristics. Within this apparent unity, however, virtual communities also manifest considerable

diversity. Herzog, Dinoff and Page (1997) began their investigation of an animal rights list expecting to find communicative patterns united around accepted practices and assumptions, such as the moral rights of animals and vegetarianism. “It quickly became apparent, however, that the list members were not a homogeneous community of like-minded souls with a common set of norms and values” (ibid, p. 401). Indeed, some members of the community were animal researchers and others whose moral paradigms sharply conflicted with the centrist animal rights agenda. As well, it is important to realize that there may be more community activities than are superficially ascertainable from observation of one particular CMC forum. Correll (1995) used Goffman’s (1959) theoretical metaphor of a stage performance to analyze the behavior she found in an online bar called the “Lesbian Café.” She found that “Frontstage, public posts [to the newsgroup] are noticeable polite, and new members are welcomed. Backstage, in the world of e-mail [which “regulars” frequently sent to one another], suspicions are shared and conversation is less polite.”

With CMC’s expanded opportunities for participation in a variety of social groups, online fieldwork facilitates a wider range of contact with different communities, helping provide greater within-method triangulation. Alternately, focus on particular virtual communities can provide a hermeneutic depth of understanding (Thompson 1997). Paccagnella (1997) investigated an Italian non-profit bulletin board built around a computer conference named *cyber_punk*. He began his ethnography with 18 months of participant observation, which enabled him to “gain an intimate understanding of the culture and the symbolic system.” During this time he also recorded and archived every message that had been posted, for a total of ten thousand messages from four hundred distinct users. In my own research, I have employed a research process that sought to exploit the social accessibility of the online medium by providing virtual communities with a central web-page that summarized and extended research relating to them and their interests. After careful searches for online forums, I participantly-observed newsgroups. This procedure of web-

page construction and newsgroup observation is merely one particular configuration expressing one particular strategic approach to the contingencies of netnography.

Fieldnotes and Other Data

The accessibility of social information in the networked computer medium also makes the amassing of large quantities of cultural data simple and fast. With the radical reduction of search costs, particularly in observational netnography, data is plentiful and easy to obtain. Web-pages can be downloaded in their entirety, the location and archival of online community interactions is uncomplicated, chat and e-mail interviews are captured as data files as they manifest. The accuracy, ease and invisibility of this function may belie the many choices, and challenges, facing the netnographer. For example, the particular format of the data, i.e., its medium, will to some extent dictate its message and how it should be interpreted (Davis and Brewer 1997; Donath, Karahalios and Viégas 1999). The use of e-mail, newsgroups, web-pages and chat room texts each use different symbolic conventions and forms mediated by technology and custom, and each carry normatively different social messages.

As well, the enormous amount of cultural data available online dictates attention to data management. Researchers cognitive capabilities need to be balanced against information technology solutions. Research focus will help calibrate to what extent the multidimensional contextual qualities of cultural data need to be retained relatively intact, rather than to classify them through the coding of computer programs (see also Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Hakken 1999, Richards and Richards 1994, Thompson 1997, Van Maanen 1988). The information accessibility of the online environs also means that the gathering of online artifacts (such as newsletters and poetry written by members of online groups) is simplified. The taking of photographs by the ethnographer can be supplemented or replaced by the gathering and analysis of those taken by other people (see also Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Techniques such as photographic and textual “autodriving”

(Heisley and Levy 1991) are possible. For example, I frequently discovered fan materials that illicitly used images, sounds and trademarks from the television shows in ways that were officially unsanctioned. As well, there were numerous fan stories, narratives, artworks, and photographs that were available for research use. As these examples suggest, the copying, analysis and citation of this rich array of online texts and images raise difficult and important issues regarding the ownership, trademark, and copyright of online textual and graphical artifacts.

The netnographer must decide how best to contextualize the often decontextualized mass of online cultural data. Because of the benefit of nearly-automatic transcription of fieldnotes, it might be plausible or even tempting to disregard formalized field journal or fieldnote procedures. An important consideration, however, is the role of reflective and reflexive fieldnotes that capture subtexts, pretexts, conditions and personal emotions that occur during the netnographer's participant-observation. If a given netnography is to be sensitive to crisis of representation issues in ethnography (Thompson, Stern and Arnould 1998; Denzin 1997; Hakken 1999), it is imperative that the participatory role of the ethnographic observer be made explicit through the use of fieldnotes that reflect upon the choices of contexts, subjectifying rather than objectifying them.

Choices about how to treat the online cultural data will necessarily proceed from assumptions about the division and relationship between virtual reality and embodied reality. The assumptions and choice of method followed in my prior research on media fan and game-playing virtual communities treat online interaction as an inseparable part of embodied life, because networked computer usage is always embedded in wider social practices, and these practices are also, rightly, subject to ethnographic scrutiny and representation in fieldnotes. In that research, this perspective led to an introspective use of reflexive journal writing (also called "noting"). This noting covered personal observations and physically embedded social relations that were not captured in the textual and graphical files relating to online interaction. Noting supplemented

embodied participant-observation and interviews, exploring the way online community and CMC were interrelated with other social and cultural experiences.

Trust and Rapport

Once a researcher has gained access to and familiarity with an online community and its members, she must build relationships of trust and gain rapport to help ensure that the various levels of cultural meaning are being honestly disclosed and translated. Gaining trust and rapport requires netnographers be attuned to the moral, intellectual and aesthetic needs of community members. It requires a sound ethical stance, one that maintains the anonymity of informants, and respect for their ideals and beliefs. It can often involve the netnographer in acts of contribution to the community (such as posting and maintaining links, and answering questions). These acts often require active participation. Gaining trust and building rapport often also involve the provision of reassurances about identity of the researcher, the researcher's affiliations, and the use of social information gathered online. It may require self-disclosure in a very public medium.

For example, Hamman (1996), in his study of cybersex in America Online chatrooms, electronically sent potential informants an agreement that stated they would remain anonymous in everything he wrote (in order to help "relieve any fears of exposure"), and that he would not engage in cybersex with them at any time (in order to clarify his objective as research, and not the desired for personal arousal). He reminded informants of their anonymity at several points during the interview. During his interviews, particularly during sections where he asked "very intimate questions," Hamman would "openly share" his own experience with the informants. He found that once he disclosed his own feelings, rapport was established. Speaking of his own participant observation, he said that he understands "their feelings and fears about cybersex" because he had "some of the same feelings and fears myself." After the interview, he addressed any questions informants might have had about his research. He also left each informant with his name, e-mail

address, postal (“snail mail”) address, and the URL (web address) where the research paper would be made publicly available.

The uniquely mutable, dynamic, and multiple landscape of CMC mediates social representation and problematizes the issue of informant identity. Prior CMC research suggests a useful examination of certain presuppositions about the issue. Should alterations to identity be treated as deceptions, or as interesting data on self-construction (e.g., see Myers 1987, Turkle 1995)? To answer this question, netnographers must decide to what extent embodied identities (e.g., hardwired characteristics such as demographics) are critical to the topic under investigation. If gauging the level of anonymity, or matching virtual to embodied identities are important topics, sound ethnographic procedures are generally helpful (Kendall 1999). Heeding face-to-face ethnographic procedures that emphasize immersion, prolonged engagement with the culture, and persistent observation of it are important foundations, but unlikely to be sufficient given online challenges. Triangulation and the quest for data convergence dictate that the netnographer should make every reasonable attempt to verify, through other sources (e.g., legitimate surveys in research or mass media publications) information gathered online, and to supplement this information with first-hand information gathered in face-to-face encounters with some informants. The importance of comparisons of the expressed “perspective of action” of the online informant with the “perspective in action” (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) of online market members observed by the netnographer attain an even greater importance in online fieldwork, where other ‘clues’ to dishonesty (such as unconscious body language) might be absent. Technology can also be employed to validate identities using a limited number of online tools, such as checking the person’s background against their user profile. With additional verification, a convergence of perspectives will lead to research conclusions more worthy of trust.

Alternatively, topics may be explored in which precise demographic information is not

essential to conclusions (i.e., which focus on market-oriented meanings, observable symbol use and practice), and to treat all identity-related information identity as only conditionally true. This research would likely be founded on a perspective that holds netnography's realm of study to be not (merely) the physical human bodies of computer users (i.e., characteristics that demographics alone can relate), but entire human social networks, which includes the imaginary spaces and selves they interactively create and inhabit. Rather than focusing upon ideas of informant integrity, or dishonesty and misrepresentation this perspective draws researcher attention to the content and process of self-construction: how people use technologies and cultural meanings to arrange and transform themselves in acts of expressive consumption. No cultural information should be discounted, as even intentional deceptions may be analyzed as revealing useful information. Like Haraway (1995), the netnographer would recognize that "the imaginary and the real figure each other in concrete fact, and so [would] take the actual and the figural seriously as constitutive of lived material-semiotic worlds." The anonymity of the online world thus becomes an opportunity to explore topics that might be more difficult to pursue in a face-to-face context. Online anonymity offers a space wherein researchers can study aspects and experimentations of self that people do not normally reveal in public offers (as Turkle 1995 emphasizes, as with her analogical discussion of computer as Rorschach tests). Netnography holds considerable promise as a way to study human social networks, which include the imaginary spaces and selves they interactively create and inhabit. A surprisingly large number of personal web pages demonstrate the immense freedom the Internet provides to individuals to reveal their inner feelings and desires. This perspective is very much in accord with Oscar Wilde's sentiment that "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell the truth."

In my netnographies, trust and rapport have been gained through the provision of considerable information about the research, the researcher, and the disposition of the research

findings. Ethnographers are constantly seeking authentic ways in which to compensate the informants and communities for their participation. My research homepages served as potentially useful intellectual contributions to the various virtual communities I examined. The homepages brought people, ideas, and academic resources together. As well, during the hundreds of hours of contact with online informants, many opportunities arose to create dialogs that built trust and gained rapport. In one case I communicated extensively with an informant over a period of several months about her family problems and her upcoming vocational and educational decisions. Establishing ethnographic rapport such as this helps to inspire increased confidence in the findings.

Interviews

In a very real sense, cyberspace is already permeated by the interview. As a nearly limitless interactional space, newsgroups, chat rooms and e-mail messages are filled with the interpersonal dialog of questions and answers. Online community members expound and explore, share personal histories, tall tales, anecdotes, and urban myths. Observing, recording, decoding and finding the common and the particular in the stories these people tell is one important source of market-oriented insight that netnographers can derive.

In addition to participant-observation, researchers can also initiate CMC interviews, or cyber-interviews. However, unlike most face-to-face research, such as ethnography, or interview, the general online environment is a mass medium. Gaining the personal access necessary for online personal interviews therefore must rely in part upon a *web-based intrication strategy* that attracts informants, and transitions their communications from a public and group (e.g., newsgroup, web-page) to a private and individual level (e.g., e-mail). Successfully achieving this in the online environment depends on the researcher's *research marketing* practices. My web-based intrication strategy used the targeted mass broadcasting properties of the online medium to attract people to the research homepage by listing it on several of the major search engines (Yahoo, excite, and Alta

Vista). Related market-oriented web-sites were also visited, and a polite email sent to their owners to invite them to visit the research home page, and to cross-link their site with it (often a quid pro quo was arranged whereby the two sites linked one another). The research home page was also publicized continually in relevant newsgroups through repeated, polite postings. The research home page offered an accurate and generally complete description of the researcher's credentials and the research (while avoiding offering leading questions), guaranteed informants anonymity, and then offered a series of questions (termed a "cyber-interview") about their backgrounds and market-oriented behavior that could be submitted in either form or e-mail response formats. Several of the questions were intended to entice members of the market segment to want to answer.

In his study of the online manipulation of social cues and communication contexts, Myers (1987) attracted informants by operating a local public, free access bulletin board system. He initially required users of the board to answer two online surveys, then conducted online focus group interviews, private online interviews, and participant observation of structured and unstructured role play. Myers' pioneering research technique demonstrates how, once contact has been established, a CMC interview, or cyber-interview, can occur. Like their face-to-face counterparts, there are a variety of formats that interviews may take: group-based or individual, formal or informal, structured or unstructured. The communicative and cultural characteristics of particular online communities are better suited to particular interview styles. The real time, synchronous aspects of rooms –with their unfettered nature and conversational tone—are more appropriate for informal interview styles whose objective is insight through spontaneous disclosure (e.g., Hamman 1996, Turkle 1995, Witmer 1997). More suitable to the aims of a formal interview are posted newsgroup or e-mail questions that may yield more carefully considered answers, or group processes of norm and value negotiation (Baym 1995, Clerc 1996, Jenkins 1995). In an online community or forum, "persistent conversation" can, nonetheless, advance the revelation of

personal and emotional insights (Chenault 1998). When coupled with researcher genuineness, trust-building and heartfelt confession, cyber-interviews (which can often seem a synthesis of penpal-like enthusiasm and ongoing tutelage) can provide much disclosure and enlightenment. For example, to informants I often confessed my embarrassment at publicly admitting that I was a fan. With several informants I shared personal matters such as my personal interests and my feelings about family relationships and current occupational status.

Coupling the questions and answers of an interview with the deployment of digital projectives can enable access to more profound and tacit levels of cultural knowledge. Digital projectives encompass the online purveyance of word completion tasks, open-ended questions, auto-driving reflection of informant texts and images, and requests for scanned artworks and doodles. Sensibly customized, any projective technique easily transports to cyberspace. In my research, I have asked informants to reflect upon or explain their drawings or photographs, and have iterated several rounds of explanation and discussion. The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman 1997), uses informant-selected images, collage construction, depth interview, value laddering, art therapy, sensory inventory and structured fantasizing, and is relatively easy to digitize and make Internet-accessible. These provide examples of the use of projective tasks in netnography.

While digital projectives are currently underutilized, online surveys (a form of highly formalized interview) are rapidly gaining popularity, and have been found in initial research to produce exploratory results as valid as mail surveys (Miller et al. 1996). However, because of limited bandwidth, and because single e-mail messages are customarily short, a single e-mail cyber-interview exchange will contain far less useful information than a single face-to-face interview. A more longitudinal, long-term approach of repeated question and answer is therefore vital, where repeated exchanges can be used to build rapport and delve into peripheral and emergent topics. Interview answers also depend even more than in other media upon the literacy and technical

abilities of the informant. Particularly in e-mail interviews, the face-to-face interviewer's significant and well-practiced mumbled "mm-hmm," or her raised eyebrow are rendered nearly useless by bandwidth limitation that attenuate the amount of social information. The give and take of continual response is more present in "real-time" interviews in chat rooms. Therefore, particularly where both parties to the interview are skilled at the use of the online medium to convey emotion, even single sessions of one hour or more may provide a considerable amount of useful information. Finally, the altered temporal topography of the medium, and its necessity for transferring oral dialog into textual mean that informants have more opportunities to deliberately reflect upon their answers. Where motivated to do so, they may, therefore, provide answers more influenced by self-presentational concerns. As an example of ways to attune and address this, consider this short excerpt with one of my informants from a communication that extended over one year:

Ethnographer: Some interesting points last letter. It is always a learning experience communicating with you --a most enriching dialog for me, at this end. I hope that I manage to maintain your interest. ;) (April 24, 1996)

"Amanda"⁸: As to retaining my interest, consider me a recursor: studying you studying us. (April 26, 1996)

Ethnographer: [Referring to last interview:] What's a "yed"? Some kind of editor, obviously. But what kind?

Amanda: Yed. Sorry, fanspeak. "The Editor" -> "Ye Editor" -> "Yed."

Ethnographer: [Last interview, you said that] accounting for profits is kind of a negligible defense --a smokescreen for other concerns. What I'm still very interested in is what are those concerns? What in fandom is more important than ownership and rights? (April 24, 1996)

Amanda: Re: what other concerns more important, I wasn't kidding. Egoboo [ego boost] is the coin of the fannish realm. To be known and admired, especially by people you know and admire. When someone asks you to sing a song you wrote, or asks for a copy, or tells you you really ought to consider sending your stuff to Xenofilkia [a fan magazine], this is the bottom line. This is why you made the effort in the first place. And when someone filks *you*, you know you've arrived! (April 26, 1996)

This interview excerpt demonstrate how I sought to overcome bandwidth limitations by seeking to prolong and maintain contact, by using emoticons (suggesting that my comments are friendly and to some extent social), by asking for clarification of emic terms (such as "yed"), and by

probing deeper into matters that were still unclear (e.g., the “other concerns” of fans beyond having profitable copyrights to their work). Through employing strategies of repetition and within-informant triangulation, bandwidth limitations were overcome to some extent. Providing numerous questions, probes, comments, and personal observations and revelations in my interviews, I intended to encourage long responses, and a more social mode of discourse. This in turn was intended to mitigate the increased time for reflection of the cyber-interview. My analysis subsequently examined the responses for inconsistencies, hyperbole, and other clues that self-presentational concerns might be obscuring important social or personal information.

A final strategy that might be used in order to contextualize and inform cyber-interviews is *e-profiling*. E-profiling uses the unprecedented social information accessibility of the medium to effectively supplement the information obtained during online interviews. For example, consider “David,” an *X-Files* fan who had responded to numerous newsgroup postings on <alt.tv.x-files>. As a possible prelude and adjunct to contact with him, the “author profile” function of a major newsgroup archive (<http://www.deja.com>) was utilized to gain access to the 535 unique messages David had posted to various groups as of October 1999. These included groups that discussed: the Millennium, Due South, Prisoner, Profiler and Twin Peaks television series, Bob Larson, Bill Gates, the Bible, messianic and prophesy-related topics, agnosticism, the Baptist religion, the writings of C. S. Lewis, the movies of Stanley Kubrick, Christian rock, the Tragically Hip rock band, and the games of Go and Carmageddon. Reading an informant’s postings and visiting the newsgroups to which they post regularly –or their personal web-pages or profiles—can confer precious perceptions of their social situation, interpretive communities (Fish 1979), life themes and life goals (Mick and Buhl 1992). E-profiling provided a more multidimensional portrait of David as a person with a variety of consumption and social interests, assisting in more robustly contextualizing his status as an *X-files* fan in the context of his lived experience as participant in a complex of religious and

leisure-centered social interactions. Demonstrating the information accessibility of the medium, profiling can be performed for any person who has ever publicly posted any information to a newsgroup.

Research Ethics

The ethics of social science data collection in cyberspace have been the topic of recent debate. Research in cyberspace has panopticon-like qualities and provides a wealth of opportunities for researcher abuse (Hakken 1999, King 1996, Sharf 1999). Although they are technically fairly simple matters, activities such as using newsgroup databases to e-profile informants, capturing a stream of conversation from chat rooms and dungeons, and downloading information from web-pages and newsgroups present ethical conundra to netnographic market researchers.

It is perhaps unsurprisingly, given differing deontological, teleological and postmodern perspectives on research ethics, that a clear consensus on appropriate online procedures has not emerged (Thomas 1996). These ethical debates turn on two interrelated concerns: (1) is the CMC medium a private or a public medium, and, (2) what constitutes “informed consent” in cyberspace? The resolution of these issues is currently unclear. Netnography offers novel ethical dilemmas because the public posting is not privileged information given specifically, and in confidence, to the researcher, as is often the case in ethnography. Yet the legal and moral issues surrounding ownership, and research or commercial utilization, of publicly posted Internet materials are unresolved. Rafaeli (quoted in Sudweeks and Rafaeli 1995) summarized the consensus of the ProjectH Research Group, an international team of scholars that debated the issue of postings’ private versus public nature: “We view public discourse on CMC as just that: public. . . . Such study is more akin to the study of tombstone epitaphs, graffiti, or letters to the editor. Personal? -yes. Private? -no.” The ProjectH group voted on an ethical policy in which the informed consent of participants was not required for the recording and analysis of publicly posted messages. Because

posting a message to the online forum was seen as clearly a public act, it was argued that informed consent was implicit in the act. King (1996), however, based his analysis on the notion that online forums dissolve the distinction between public and private places. These distinctions normally guide scholars to interpret conventional guidelines of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent. He therefore reached the opposite conclusion.⁹ Naturalistic studies of online communities “often involve the lack of informed consent, where the group members under study are unaware they are being monitored. There is a potential for psychological harm to the members of these groups, depending on the way results are reported” (King 1996, p. 119). Reid (1996) stresses the important of courtesy, as well as ethics, by arguing for their future effects of “poisoning the research well” with disruptive and invasive research. Sharf (1999) lists the chief ethical concerns that have become apparent in online cultural research as privacy, confidentiality, appropriation of others’ personal stories, and informed consent.

Informed consent is particularly important because CMC may increase the researcher tendency to objectify informants “due to the seemingly impersonal nature of text-based exchanges” (Hakken 1999; King 1996, p. 122). As the lived social experience of interpersonal interaction is turned into text, people are more easily turned into data. Slouka (1995) contends that, as people no longer share a common, embodied experience, and a sense of the difference between the real and the imagined, they become less able to develop a sense of the impact of their behavior on others, and thus to act ethically. There may be a concurrent underestimation of the consequences of lack of consent by informants (Reid 1996). Other scholars argue persuasively that the uniqueness of CMC as a public-private hybrid infers that old ethical standards simply do not apply and must be negotiated anew (Thomas 1996).

Netnographers who adopt a conservative approach to research ethics (almost certainly the wisest course in a time of increasing public interest and institutional review board scrutiny) might

be advised to pursue research *strategies of high visibility*. Strategies of high visibility intentionally maximize the obvious presence of the researcher's participation as researcher. Correll (1995) apparently followed such a strategy of high visibility in her study of the online bulletin board "Lesbian Café." She first contacted the founder of the café to ask for permission and approval. She then posted a public notice on the newsgroup describing her study and asking for interview volunteers. Each week, she posted a new note describing the study in order to inform café patrons that they were being observed. Using and extending strategies of high visibility, Sharf (1999, p. 253-255) offers a sensible and concise initial set of netnographic ethical guidelines:

1. The researcher should consider whether the research purposes are in conflict with or harmful to the purposes of the virtual community. Conversely, consider whether the research might benefit the group in some way.
2. The researcher should clearly introduce himself or herself as to identity, role, purpose, and intention to the on-line group or individuals who are the desired focus of the study.
3. The researcher should make a concerted effort to contact directly the individual who has posted a message that he or she wishes to quote in order to seek consent.
4. The researcher should seek ways to maintain openness to feedback from virtual community members who are being studied.
5. The researcher should strive to maintain and demonstrate a respectful sensitivity toward the psychological boundaries, purposes, vulnerabilities, and privacy of individual members of a self-defined virtual community, even though its discourse is publicly available.

Attempting to ensure confidentiality, researchers such as Turkle (1995, p. 324) are careful to "follow a consistent policy of disguising the identities" of all informant by inventing names, places (virtual and real) and some elements of personal background. My own netnographies have followed this type of conservative approach. Researcher self-presentation strove for a clear and accurate delineation of affiliations, motivations and goals for the research, and provided multiple ways for informants to audit the researcher (providing office phone number, address, access to credentials, resumé or curriculum vitae). The information accessibility of the medium means that the researcher, too, is 'in a fishbowl,' and her interaction with virtual community members is a matter of public record subject to group scrutiny. The confidentiality and anonymity of all informants was

considered, as the research referred to them with pseudonyms. Heading, signatures, and dates were removed. However, because of the specificity of the focus of the article, the actual names of newsgroups observed were provided. The ability to disguise distinctive actions, habitats or characteristics which might point towards informants' online identities was also complicated by the social information accessibility that made searching for an archived copy of their public message fairly straightforward.

In the interest of ensuring informed consent, contact by e-mail was established with all persons whose direct quotations were to be used in order to gain their permission. Distinct from postings, Web pages have been considered public information. Where data was gathered through online cyber-interviews that fully disclose the research, informed consent has been implicit, and confidentiality easier to assure. The netnography also sought to respect the dignity of members of the virtual communities and their beliefs by providing informants with multiple avenues for reviewing the foundations of the research and drafts of the research text, providing feedback, and asking questions.

Member Checks

The information accessibility of CMC enables an enhanced opportunity to present research that has been thoroughly reviewed by those it seeks to represent. Member checks (Arnould and Wallendorf, p. 485; Hirschman 1986, p. 244; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988) are a procedure whereby some or all of a final research report's findings are presented to the people who have been studied in order to solicit their comments on observations and interpretations. The low costs of CMC enable the researcher to easily provide any interested network computer either part of, or the entire full text of the research. The collection of informant comments is also simplified and expedited through e-mail.

Making netnographic research publicly available fits well with recent emphases in

ethnography on closer ties between researcher and researched community (Denzin 1997; Hakken 1999; Thompson, Stern and Arnould 1998; Van Maanen 1988). It also suggests a technological means to help realize Gramsci's (1971) notion of the *organic intellectual*, the scholar who seeks to share knowledge with the wider public, not exclusively with students and fellow academics. Beyond this, it might help in realizing some of the hidden potential in the paradigms of relationship marketing by structuring market research—an important point of contact between organizations and their customers—as a forum for ongoing, widespread, bidirectional communication. Member checks of my research have been undertaken in person as well as using CMC. A complete copy of the text, which had not been rewritten for lay readers, is provided members of the same culture or community.

Cultural Exit

In face-to-face ethnography, the boundaries separating participation from non-participation in a group are, generally, physical and straightforward. In online interactions, the electronic manifestations of one's participation endure, and have lasting 'telepresence' (Kim and Biocca 1997) after the netnographer has ceased actively supporting them. Researchers face a variety of decisions regarding how to manage this lingering telepresence. Netnographies may be based upon traditional conceptions of time and immersion (and, for example, be measured in hours or months of cultural contact). Alternately, researchers may consider virtual communities' informational accessibility and opportunities to participate in order to conceptualize netnography as a type of continuous process, a combination of learning and public education that is to some extent ongoing and dynamic. Netnography conceptualized in this manner would tend not merely to examine a particular online group over some specific span of time, but would longitudinally investigate the ongoing and dynamic evolution of a certain 'cyberspatially'-situated market or segment. This perspective also integrates well into a strategic relationship marketing perspective in which the goal of marketing

research is to gain an intimate and ongoing understanding of a particular market segments' changing needs. It also draws netnography closer to its roots in cultural anthropology, where researchers traditionally spent much of their entire careers deepening their expertise in one cultural area, usually coming back to the same group in the same geographical area over twenty or thirty years (Van Maanen 1988).

Representation

Moving beyond the traditional topic matter of fieldwork, but interrelated with the manner in which it fieldwork is conducted, is ethnographic representation. The CMC environment offers previously unheard of control over the form and content of research publication, the potential for vast audiences, and unique opportunities to employ hypertext and hypermedia.¹⁰ Ethnography is, in many ways, cinematic in its gaze (Denzin 1997) and the interactive multimedia format of the Internet is an ideal forum for providing a richer, more vivid and immediate representation of cultural meanings, practices and experiences than that offered by paper-bound media. Arnould and Wallendorf (1994, p. 500) explain that such a “thick transcription” (Clifford 1990) style of research representation can be useful in meeting marketing management goals.

The CMC medium is flexible, accommodating traditional “realist” ethnographies in which an authoritative narrator describes and rhetorically supports contentions regarding cultural practices and meanings (Van Maanen 1988). The medium also may be ideally suited to an ‘experimental’ ethnography that seeks an ‘open’ representation that reveals the constructed nature of the researcher’s interpretations (Denzin 1997). Hypertext and hypermedia may be used to include the different and divergent voices of virtual community members. Netnographers can choose the degree of polyphony (Clifford 1990) to employ in their research by providing some or many links to web-pages, rings, rooms and other virtual community sites utilized in the research. In this polyphonic procedure, not only are the authors of those additional works afforded “voice” in the research

representation (helping to minimize the enforced overlaying of researcher interpretation), but the research reader is also granted immediate access to large amounts of additional data that she or he is invited to test and interpret using his or her own –as well as the author’s—theoretical schemes.

Netnographic representation again represents a discontinuous innovation from traditional ethnographic representation, not simply an extension of it. With multimedia additions and an online community as its focus, the ethnographic goal of representation can approach that of simulation. Readers are educated online. The voyeuristic act of research readership vanishes, replaced by interactive experiential participation. The intertextual and hypertextual research article provides a launch point for gaining contact with culture members, experiencing them first hand (but guided by the interpretations and experiential structuring of the netnographer). In well-developed versions of this concept, the netnography would be an educational research tool, one that is written and constructed even as it is read (Mitra and Cohen 1999), and that never appears or is read exactly the same way twice. The flexibility of the medium will undoubtedly lead to experimentation combining analytic groundedness in data with the provisionality and contestability of a poststructural representation.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Netnography has been presented as a technique that enables the use of networked computers for market research on online market-oriented communities. The techniques are adapted to the social technomediation, open participation in social groups and accessibility of social information that characterize CMC and virtual community. Netnography presents flexible guidelines for conducting online fieldwork that adaptively address central ethnographic concerns of cultural entrée, fieldnotes, trust and rapport, interviews, ethics, member checks and cultural exit as well as the representation of research. Sound ethnographic principles such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, immersion and participation in the culture, reflexive fieldnoting, and

rigorous forms of data analysis and interpretation have been found to be as important to online as they are to face-to-face ethnography. However, in a number of other instances, netnography seems to represent a discontinuous innovation in the conduct of ethnography. Unique adaptations to the conduct of online fieldwork have been required, such as using methodological strategies of: mobilizing for fieldwork through detailed examination of cultural options, lurking, using a web intrication strategy, identity verification, e-profiling, and maintaining ethical standards through a strategy of high researcher visibility. Radically new and different forms of research representation are made possible.

Theoretically, CMC and netnography may present a number of radical breaks with past conceptualizations and methodological histories. Traditionally, anthropologists performed single-site ethnographies, usually in cultures other than their own. Subsequently, they began studying local cultures, and to engage in multi-sited ethnography. Netnography partakes of these trends, while altering them in novel and discontinuous ways. Netnography is in some ways multi-sited ethnography (or can be a part of a multi-sited ethnography). It is, however, located in virtual space, which can be conceived of as simultaneously local and nonlocal, and which contains aspect of both single sites (e.g., a particular net culture, such as online game players of *WarCraftIII*) and multi-sites (e.g., particular sites such as the official *WarCraftIII* site, the unofficial site, chat rooms, MUDs, newsgroups). In CMC, there is little or no face-to-face communication, but there is, according to a general consensus among researchers, community (e.g., Chenault 1998; Correll 1995; Jones, 1995, 1999; Lea and Spears 1995; Hakken 1999; Kendall 1999; Komito 1998; Surratt 1998). There is also widespread negotiation of identities across sites (as is present in earlier multi-sited ethnography). CMC suggests that the challenges of understanding traditional cultural formations have been heightened. The possibility of newer forms of cultural understanding, based upon its disembodied and nonlocal aspects, is greatly enhanced.

As Bernard (1973) has noted, the role of location in the concept of community may not be viable in the future as space becomes less important due to changes in communication and transportation technology. Some basic social science constructs, such as “community,” may have to be re-examined for their relevance in light of new technologically-mediated social developments. The ramifications of the hybrid public-private nature of the Internet, and the implosion of public and private spaces, will have major impacts on individual and social life. There are critical legal and moral implications flowing from these blurred boundaries, in which corporate trademarks are easily appropriated, and private fantasies, opinions and even living spaces are open to the scrutiny of market researchers and governmental agencies. In her study of virtual reality, Chayko (1993) contends that the definition of “real” experience may need to be rethought. Attention to virtual communities suggests that commonplace notions that the tidy conceptual separations between the real and the virtual, the embodied and the mediated, the fantastic and the material, will need to be rethought—a notion that finds some support in postmodern thought (e.g., Firat and Venkatesh 1995). These important changes, which are radically transforming the individual and society (both for good and for ill), are of interest to market researchers and other social scientists and deserve further research attention in subsequent investigations.

The netnographic representation of market research presents opportunities and challenges also deserving research attention. Because of hypertext, and social accessibility, writing ethnography on and of the Internet is very different from traditional ethnography. Because the voices of informants are so easily incorporated, the ethnographer now has to strain in order to have her/his narrative voice heard. The negotiation of new identities within and across sites is also tenuous and helps netnography break new conceptual ground. These important theoretical and practical issues need to be investigated further. Scientific examination is also needed to understand the nature of the different types of virtual community available to market research. Although not

explored in this research, important differences were noted between official (corporately sponsored, and often moderated) and unofficial (grassroots organized, and usually unmoderated) virtual communities. Future market research should examine these differences to understand the different cultural formations and types of social information and interaction present in these different types of forum.

An important and practical implication of netnography is that new technologies and cultural formations may now enable greater accessibility of the ethnographic method and of cultural topics to market researchers. Traditionally, as with Malinowskian ethnography, considerable inconvenience, investment of time and personal sacrifice were associated with ethnography. To some extent, personal inconvenience and onerous investments of time can be ameliorated by technology that compresses and even obviates space and time. For example, the traditional laboriousness associated with finding and communicating with particular types of consumers (subcultures, international markets) have been to a large extent eliminated by the advantages of networked computing and CMC (where these are present and widely in use).

Netnographic research that is international can be engaged in, to some extent, without ever leaving home –a form of “distance research” to match the advent of distance learning. Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1992) has urged ethnographers to take seriously the methodological implications of globalization. Netnography entails the development of a form of market-oriented research that is more globalized in its focus. Handling the increasingly international, fragmented and factionalized constituency of cyberspace entails a globalizing of method as it develops research frames that simultaneously encompass “the global and the national, the cultural and the local” (Hakken 1999, p. 59). As well, the social information accessibility of CMC translates into considerably less time spent collecting data in the field, providing more time for analysis, introspective self-reflection, and the addressing of representational concerns. This advantageous

access to market-oriented cultures, informants and their data might provide the temptation to engage in more superficial or inferior analyses than otherwise would be the case. Caution and adherence to a good set of methodological guidelines (such as standards of prolonged engagement and researcher immersion) should help to counteract this potential drawback.

As marketers increasingly incorporate networked computing into every aspect of their strategy and tactics, virtual communities are increasingly being employed as forums for promotion and information gathering (e.g., Armstrong and Hagel 1995, Hagel and Armstrong 1997). The techniques of netnography explicated in this article suggest that market research in the information age will inevitably combine interactive communication with data-gathering. For marketing researchers in academia and industry, participation in netnographic research may yield unexpected benefits. Netnography can become a way to build long-term relationships with particular markets as well as to increasingly communicate research findings and other information to particular markets, segments, and the public-at-large.

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TABLE 1: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition
F2F	Culturally embedded (emic) term referring to communication that is conducted “face to face” or in person
MUD, MOO, MUSE, MUCK	Abbreviations and software acronyms used to refer to a multi-user dungeon, a computer network asynchronously connecting social participants, often providing a themed “place” for their interactions (e.g., a forest, a space station), and traditionally focused on relationships through role-playing
Persistent Conversation	The CMC equivalent of persistent observation; CMC interactions that persist over significant time periods, resulting in rapport, social bonding, and personal disclosure
Flaming	Flaming is the practice of sending embarrassing and insulting e-mail messages to a person's mailbox or in response to their public newsgroup posting.
Web Intrication Strategy	A research strategy involving the use of a research homepage that seeks to intricate (attract or capture) informants’ attention through active promotion of the home page and the appealing nature of some of its content

TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF FACE TO FACE AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

	Face-to-Face Communication	Computer-Mediated Communication
Nature of Message and Communication	Immediate and Instantaneous -unified and self-contained messages	Subject to Time Lag -fragmented messages
	Embodied -verbal and body language Referencing More Stable Representations of Identity -identifiability -accountability -social desirability concerns	Textual -symbolic language Referencing More Flexible Representation of Identity -anonymity -experimentation with multiple identities -expression of illicit fantasies, needs and desires
Participation in Social Groups	-Linguistic and cultural capital restrictions -Generally exclusive ethos -Geographically and temporally bounded	-Technical and financial restrictions -Participatory, egalitarian ethos -Geographically and temporally unbounded
Accessibility of Social Information	-Generally clear demarcations of public versus private communications -Social information evanescent -Search costs high	-Public-private hybrid -Social information inscribed and archived -Search costs low

TABLE 3: METHODOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF CMC CONTINGENCIES AND CONCOMITANT RESEARCH CHOICES IN NETNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

	Altered Nature of Message and Communication	Participation in Social Groups	Accessibility of Social Information
Cultural Entrée	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of cultural contact: virtual and/or embodied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of participation: “lurking” and/or participating Choice of types of online communities: boards, rings, lists, rooms or dungeons Specification of online communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent and nature of “mobilizing for fieldwork”
Fieldnotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choice of data format: e-mail, web-page, text capture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent to which cultural linkages followed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Download/ artifact ownership issues (copyright, trademark) Increased role of contextualizing Management of large amounts of data
Trust and Rapport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paradigmatic choices about informant identity: deception versus self-construction Particular methodological choices about informant honesty: researcher verification, prolonged engagement, methodological triangulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature and extent of communal contribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of social information use
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of online interview recruitment and exchange Decisions regarding sampling, interview duration and repeated contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature and extent of web-intrication strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent of use of “e-profiling” and other observational techniques
Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use and maintenance of pseudonyms and informant anonymity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Characteristics of “informed consent” online Use of strategies of visibility Extent of opportunities for informant choice and feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent to which online environment is considered private versus public social sphere
Member Checks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions regarding content and duration of member check 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent to which virtual communities treated as beneficiaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions regarding distribution of research document
Cultural Exit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions regarding managing lingering telepresence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent of longitudinal and relationship-based research planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent of current and future communal participation
Research Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent of use of hypertext and hypermedia capabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of online representation: open/experimental/postmodern versus traditional Degree of polyphony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent of public accessibility

NOTES

¹ In anthropology and cultural studies, cyberculture has also been conceptualized as the

complex field of social forces and relations in which human bodies, machines, and scientific discourses intersect (Escobar 1994, Haraway 1995). To serve more effectively the methodological orientation of this article, cyberculture is more narrowly specified. These terminological descriptions may be useful due to the newness of the research area, the idiomatic usage of the terms, and the current paucity of precise definitional demarcations.

² Venkatesh (1998) has usefully conceptualized *cybermarketscapes* (also called “cybermarkets”) as “the intersection of electronic markets and consumers” and *cyberconsumers* as the people who use these electronic markets.

³ It has been noted that the locality metaphor of cyberspace—which Hicks (1998) metaphorically links to notions of pause, readiness-at-hand, ethos and immanence—suggests an emplaced foundation for the outgrowth of community.

⁴ This finding actually fits well with the principles of a rival social psychological theory, equilibrium theory, which posits that social cues are contextually substitutable.

⁵ Barriers remaining are language- and culture-based. The real-time computerized translation of different languages is on the horizon, and knowledge of other cultures is growing through increased exposure. Even these barriers, then, might be seen as surmountable in the foreseeable future.

⁶ The use of computers for the analysis of field data and construction of theory is a different topic which, although important, will not be treated here. The interested reader is referred to Richards and Richards (1994) for a good introduction to the topic. In addition, there are available useful methodological expositions on the interpretation of ethnographic data for marketing research and strategy (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). It stands to reason that these systematic analytic procedures will perform equally well on any ethnographically generated data (i.e., data generated through face-to-face or online field research procedures).

⁷ Many, but not all, self-termed MUDs are also dungeons according to these definitions (see Kendall 1999, p. 68). Some MUDs and MOO where formal role-play is not involved (such as professional conferences or gatherings) would be classified as rooms.

⁸To guarantee anonymity, the name of this informant has been changed.

⁹ A conclusion he positioned as different from “the institutional review boards of major universities” which were “granting researchers exempt or expedited (exempt from full review) status for this work” due to its (apparently) public nature (King 1996, p. 119).

¹⁰ Hypertext is a linking of text passages so that one can move easily from one to the other. Hypermedia involves hypertext-like links that not only conjoin textual passages, but also link to audio and visual media such as sound clips, diagrams, drawings, photographs and full-motion video recordings.