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Netnography as a tool for understanding customers: implications for service research and practice

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Abstract

Purpose – Understanding customers is critical for service researchers and practitioners. Today, customers are increasingly active online, and valuable information about their opinions, experiences and behaviors can be retrieved from a variety of online platforms. Online customer information creates new opportunities to design personalized and high-quality service. This paper aims to review how netnography as a method can help service researchers and practitioners to better use such data.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic review and analysis were conducted on 321 netnography studies published in marketing journals between 1997 and 2017.

Findings – The systematic review reveals that netnography has been applied in a variety of ways across different marketing fields and topics. Based on the analysis of existing netnography literature, empirical, theoretical and methodological recommendations for future netnographic service research are presented.

Research limitations/implications – This paper shows how netnography can offer service researchers unprecedented opportunities to access naturalistic online data about customers and, hence, why it is an important method for future service research.

Practical implications – Netnographic research can help service firms with, for example, service innovation, advertising and environmental scanning. This paper provides guidelines for service managers who want to use netnography as a market research tool.

Originality/value – Netnography has seen limited use in service research despite many promising applications in this field. This paper is the first to encourage and support service researchers in their use of the method and aims to stimulate interesting future netnographic service research.

Keywords Qualitative research, Ethnography, Netnography, Service research, Method, Internet research

Paper type General review

Introduction

Understanding customers is a key aim of service marketing research and an important requirement for successful service business practice (Gummesson *et al.*, 2014). On a daily basis, customers interact with service providers, such as retailers, restaurants, retail banks, health-care providers, government services, non-profit organizations and telecommunications companies (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). However, due to rapid advancements, especially in information technology, the context in which service is delivered, experienced and evaluated is changing (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015). Today's service customers are increasingly active online before, during and after interactions with service providers, which creates large masses of information about their activities and experiences (Berthon *et al.*, 2015; Wuenderlich *et al.*, 2015). Much of this information is publicly available and presents new opportunities for more personalized, higher quality service (Rust and Huang, 2014).

Collecting and analyzing such extensive data, however, is one of the main challenges in today's service marketing research and practice (Aksoy, 2013; Baron and Russell-Bennett, 2016).

This paper explores how the method termed *netnography* can help service researchers analyze available online data. Netnography is acknowledged as a useful research tool for collecting and analyzing online customer information (Kozinets, 1999; Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Catterall and Maclaran, 2002). Originally developed as a response to customers' increasing internet use (Kozinets, 1997), netnography is based on an ethnographic research approach to studying and understanding consumption-related aspects of customers' lives online (Kozinets, 2006). In today's environment of digitalization, netnography is more relevant than ever before (Simmons, 2008; Tikkanen *et al.*, 2009; Rokka, 2010). Even though netnography has already been used

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for some service-related research (Yang and Fang, 2004; Brown and Patterson, 2009; Medberg and Heinonen, 2014), the method has much more to offer service researchers. The development of new technology not only creates new digital forms of service but also affects customers' current service usage. Through netnographic inquiry, researchers can gain new perspectives on traditional service or explore new types of digital service (e.g. online streaming of entertainment, online storage space or online gaming).

As the number of internet users continued to increase around the world, and more parts of individuals' lives began occurring online, the popularity of netnography increased rapidly among both researchers and practitioners (Kozinets, 2015). Two recent reviews of netnography (Bartl *et al.*, 2016; Costello *et al.*, 2017) reflect and underscore the deep interest in the method. However, while these reviews provide a good general overview of the netnographic literature across disciplines, there has been no focused systematic analysis of how netnography has been used in marketing research and what opportunities exist for service researchers. Moreover, while Bartl *et al.* (2016) and Costello *et al.* (2017) focus on how netnography should be used, the aim of the present study was, rather, to illustrate the actual use of this method and possible avenues for its future use.

The purpose of this research, therefore, was to conduct a systematic literature review of the contextual (research field), conceptual (research topic) and procedural (methodological application) varieties of netnographic marketing research. As the aim was to identify and present what opportunities exist for service researchers, the point of departure for the review and analysis was a service marketing perspective. Service marketing literature can be divided into the classic service management theories, which focus on services from an exchange perspective (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985, 1988), and the more recent service perspective, which focuses on processes of value creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008). In this review across research fields, topics and methodological applications, the identified netnographic marketing studies were categorized into traditional services, a service perspective or none. The results of this extensive review and analysis have yielded empirical, theoretical and methodological recommendations for future netnographic service research.

The comprehensive analysis and recommendations herein are intended to inspire and support service researchers in their use of the method. Moreover, there is a need for further delineation of the practical relevance of netnography for service managers. As methodological guidelines had been scrutinized previously (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2010; Langer and Beckman, 2005), the current study was not aimed at developing or refining the netnography method. Instead, the objectives were to analyze the applications of netnography in marketing research and to encourage service researchers to use the method. To this end, three research questions were formulated to guide the review and analysis:

- RQ1. In what marketing research fields has netnography been used?
- RQ2. What marketing research topics have been researched with netnography?
- RQ3. How have marketing researchers applied netnography?

An extensive review was conducted on 321 articles using netnography that were published over the past two decades (1997–2017). The review indicated that the use of netnography had increased substantially since the publication of the first articles in the late 1990s. This paper is written in the spirit of other articles in the marketing discipline that investigated methodological issues and recommendations, such as agent-based modeling (Rand and Rust, 2011), critical incident technique (Gremler, 2004), visual methods (Pain, 2012) and structural equation models (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

The two main contributions of this paper are:

- 1 its presentation of a contextual (research field), conceptual (research topic) and procedural (methodological application) overview of the body of netnography studies in marketing; and
- 2 its empirical, theoretical and methodological recommendations for service researchers seeking new ways of understanding customers.

The focus is on the notion of customers in a broad sense – that is, as marketplace actors including consumers and individuals. For simplicity, the term “customer” (as opposed to “consumer”, for example) is used in this paper.

The remaining parts of the paper are structured as follows. First, the method of netnography is briefly presented. Then, the methodology of the systematic literature review undertaken in this paper is outlined. The next section describes the findings of the study. Finally, conclusions are drawn and discussed in the last section of the paper.

Netnography

Ethnographic enquiry has traditionally been used to gain a deep understanding of marketplace cultures and actors (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Over the past two decades, however, the internet has created unprecedented opportunities for customer insights (Bickhart and Schindler, 2001; Catterall and Maclaran, 2002; Puri, 2007). When Kozinets (1997, 1998) developed netnography in the 1990s, customers' online presence was limited to virtual communities of enthusiasts discussing common interests and forming their own cybercultures. Today, customers are constantly connected to the internet through computers and an array of mobile devices; the younger generations especially share many of their opinions, experiences and everyday activities online. Thus, the evolution of netnographic research is closely linked to the evolution of the internet and information technologies (e.g. social media, internet of things, social networking sites and mobile technology). The abundance of traces left by customers on various online platforms is valuable data for researchers and managers (La Rocca *et al.*, 2014; Baron and Russell-Bennett, 2016).

Netnography is closely related to other qualitative research methodologies for the online environment, such as digital ethnography, online ethnography, virtual ethnography and cyber-ethnography (Ward, 1999; Tunçalp and Lê, 2014; Hjorth *et al.*, 2017). Although some researchers regard netnography and the above terms as synonyms (e.g. Grincheva, 2014), the more established view is that netnography is a distinct research method, with its own set of methodological guidelines (Caliandro, 2014). Digital ethnography, online

ethnography, virtual ethnography and cyber-ethnography, however, are not characterized by any specific practices and thus they are considered much more general approaches to online research (Lugosi *et al.*, 2012; Kozinets, 2018).

Netnography offers several benefits over other research methods. First, netnographic data are often described as rich and naturalistic, with the ability to accurately depict the lived realities of customers (Kozinets, 2002; Sandlin, 2007; Rokka, 2010). In contrast to ethnography, netnography can be conducted in an unobtrusive manner, offering researchers a view of customers' everyday lives (Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003). Especially in the case of sensitive research topics, the unobtrusiveness of netnography might be necessary to elicit relevant data (Langer and Beckman, 2005; Keeling *et al.*, 2013). Second, netnography is an adaptable and flexible qualitative method that has proven useful in various research settings (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography is also compatible with other research methods, such as interviews (Walther and Sandlin, 2011), ethnography (McGrath *et al.*, 2013) and even surveys (Adjei *et al.*, 2010). Finally, netnography has the advantage of being faster, simpler and much less expensive than traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2006).

Yet, there are some limitations related to netnography. A main concern is the authenticity and quality of the data material (Xun and Reynolds, 2010). Owing to the difficulty of establishing the demographics of informants, a netnographic approach might be unsuitable for research that is sensitive to factors such as age, ethnicity or even gender (Mkono, 2013). Moreover, as with traditional ethnography, netnography faces limitations in regard to generalizing its findings to customer groups outside the online platforms or online communities studied (Kozinets, 1998, 2002). There has also been considerable debate regarding the ethical codes of conduct for netnographic studies (Rokka, 2010), and no consensus has been reached (Mkono and Markwell, 2014). For example, it is unclear whether netnographic research should always be conducted overtly (Catterall and Maclaran, 2002; Kozinets, 2002) or whether it can also be conducted covertly (Langer and Beckman, 2005).

Methodology

A systematic review approach was chosen to analyze the use of netnography in marketing research. Originating in the medical sciences, systematic or evidence-based literature reviews have increasingly been adopted by researchers in other disciplines to reduce bias and provide a comprehensive body of knowledge (Bryman and Bell, 2011). A systematic review investigates the literature on a particular subject with explicit and transparent methods that follow a standard series of stages (Mulrow, 1994). Consequently, systematic literature reviews are regarded as more objective, unbiased and trustworthy than traditional narrative literature reviews (Egger *et al.*, 2008).

The methodology of this review follows the general guidelines for conducting systematic literature reviews in business research (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003; Denyer and Tranfield, 2006) and examples of previous systematic reviews in the field of marketing (Tähtinen and Halinen, 2002; Gremler, 2004; Helkkula, 2011). The main steps of this study were as follows:

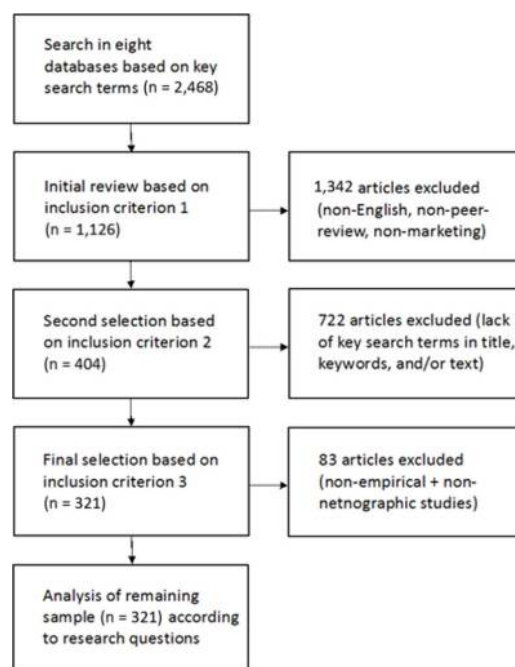
- Define search terms.
- Identify the databases and search engines.
- Determine and apply inclusion criteria.
- Repeat the filtering process to ensure a representative article selection.

The search for articles for this review was conducted in January 2018. To identify and gather all the marketing studies using netnography, the descriptors “netnography OR netnographic” were used in the literature search. The following databases were searched to identify relevant articles in the marketing field: ABI/Proquest, Business Source/EBSCO, Emerald, ScienceDirect/Elsevier, JSTOR, SAGE, Springer Link and Wiley Online. These databases provide a large selection of peer-reviewed marketing journals; thus, they were deemed appropriate for this study. The database search generated a total of 2,468 unique citations that matched the key search terms (Figure 1).

The first criterion for an article's inclusion was publication in English in a peer-reviewed journal within the discipline of marketing. The review of marketing journals was done in light of the American Marketing Association (AMA)'s (2013) definition of marketing: “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” In practice, this meant including marketing journals in the same way that previously published reviews of marketing journals did (Baumgartner and Pieters, 2003; Sullivan Mort *et al.*, 2004; Hult *et al.*, 2009). During this stage, the 2,468 citations were narrowed to 1,126.

The second inclusion criterion was the presence of the term *netnography* or *netnographic* in the title, keywords and/or article text. The search terms were deliberately delimited to these keywords; other possible descriptors, such as “digital ethnography,” “virtual ethnography,” “online ethnography” or

Figure 1 Systematic review process



“cyber-ethnography”, were not included because these latter terms are more general ones than “netnography” and can refer to many uses of qualitative online data (Lugosi *et al.*, 2012; Kozinets, 2018). As a result, 404 articles published between 1997 and 2017 were selected for review.

In the following filtering process, all the articles were carefully read by the authors and a final inclusion criterion was established: for an article to be included, it had to be an empirical study fully or partly using the netnography method. In this step, 11 conceptual articles and an additional 72 studies that were not labeled as netnographies were identified. The final selection of articles for further review resulted in 321 articles, which were later analyzed according to the research questions.

More specifically, the analysis focused on:

- the research field within marketing to which each article belonged;
- the marketing topics that the authors had researched; and
- the ways in which the authors had applied netnography.

The analysis process followed an open coding approach with categories emerging from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The coding of the articles was done by both authors of this review, who continuously compared results, discussed disagreements and refined the identified categories of research fields, topics and ways of applying netnography. In addition, in line with the adopted service marketing perspective, the analysis included a categorization of all the identified articles according to whether they involved traditional services, a service perspective or none of them. A service perspective was defined as an implicit or explicit focus on value (co-)creation through the customer lens (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005). This part of the analysis followed a process resembling the previously described article coding procedure.

Findings

Not surprisingly, the analysis revealed a rapid growth in the use of netnography by marketing researchers. As illustrated in Figure 1, it took approximately 10 years after the first netnography publication for the method to become widespread. Since 2008,

there has been a rapid increase in netnography publications in the marketing field. This trend implies that netnography has established itself as a recognized qualitative methodology among marketing researchers. Due to societal trends, social media and the continuous expansion of the internet’s reach, a continuous increase in the usage of netnography may be expected in the years ahead, before a potential flattening in the curve of publications per year (Figure 2).

Marketing research fields

The categorization of netnography according to marketing research fields revealed that almost half of the articles in this review were consumer research studies, whereas studies within the areas of branding, general marketing and tourism represented about one-fifth each (Table I). In addition, the extent to which these netnographic studies across different fields of marketing research involved traditional services, a service perspective or none of them was analyzed. Slightly above half of the studies did not have a service perspective or were not conducted in a services context. Instead, these studies often focused on product-, brand- or culturally related aspects of consumption. Furthermore, about a quarter of the studies conducted in a services context were in a tourism, restaurant, health care or financial services setting. The remaining one-sixth of the studies had a service perspective in the sense that they used service-based theories or concepts, such as co-creation or co-production.

Consumer research

Netnography has been applied in the study of various phenomena related to both consumer culture and consumer behavior. Since the introduction of netnography by Kozinets (1998, p. 366) for studying “the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet,” all types of consumers have become increasingly active online. Today, many consumption-related behaviors and activities are reflected online. For example, Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) used netnography to understand the meanings and activities surrounding the file-sharing system Napster.com, which the authors conceptualized as a community based on a culture of sharing music. Another example is a study of what makes

Figure 2 Number of marketing studies using netnography (1997-2017)

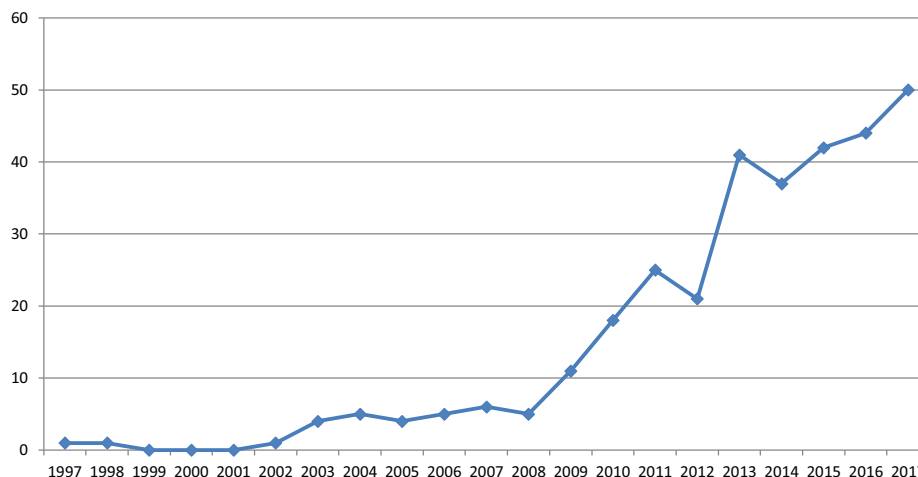


Table I Fields of netnographic marketing studies

Field	Service (%)	No. papers (<i>n</i> = 321)			Article examples (involving service, services, or none)
		Services (%)	None (%)	All (%)	
Consumer research	23 (7.2)	21 (6.5)	93 (28.9)	137 (42.6)	Füller <i>et al.</i> (2007), Kozinets (2002), Närvänen <i>et al.</i> (2013)
Branding	14 (4.4)	3 (0.9)	50 (15.6)	67 (20.9)	Schau <i>et al.</i> (2009), Oakes <i>et al.</i> (2013), Brown <i>et al.</i> (2003)
Marketing (general)	17 (5.3)	11 (3.4)	32 (10.0)	60 (18.7)	Chandler and Chen (2016), Keeling <i>et al.</i> (2013), Cocker and Cronin (2017)
Tourism	2 (0.6)	51 (15.9)	4 (1.3)	57 (17.8)	Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009), Hamilton and Alexander (2017), Luo <i>et al.</i> (2014)
Total	56 (17.5)	86 (26.7)	179 (55.8)	321 (100.0)	

online shoppers delay their online purchases, indicating that delays result from negative attitudes and experiences of online shopping, perceived risk and price, *locus of control* and purchase task complexity (Negra *et al.*, 2008).

Branding

In addition to consumer research, netnography is a popular method for studying and understanding brand-related phenomena. Different online platforms have become important for firms' branding activities. For example, much of firms' present brand management is conducted online through social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Laroche *et al.*, 2013). The internet, with its ability to connect people around the globe, has also become the main arena for customers' brand-related expressions, discussions, opinions and experiences (Edelman, 2010). Therefore, netnography has been used by marketing researchers to explore firms' online branding strategies (Tynan *et al.*, 2010; Rosenthal and Brito, 2017), as well as customers' involvement and engagement with different brands online (Colliander and Hauge Wien, 2013; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014).

Marketing (general)

Netnography has also been used in several marketing areas outside of consumer research, branding or tourism. For example, several studies in this review focused on the management of companies' marketing resources and activities. Moraes *et al.* (2014), for example, explored how companies use social media to promote their products and services. Netnographic enquiry has also been used to illustrate how social media changes the ways in which salespeople work and interact with their customers and co-workers (Rollins *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, health-care and medical services is a popular context for netnographic marketing studies (Liang and Scammon, 2011; Keeling and Laing, 2015). Netnography offers the option of covertness, which is sometimes necessary for approaching sensitive, health-related topics. Langer and Beckman (2005), for example, used netnography to gain deep insights into customers' opinions, motives and concerns regarding cosmetic surgery.

Tourism

An abundance of online sites and forums devoted to travel have emerged during the past decade. Consequently, netnography has become a popular method among marketing researchers focusing on hospitality and tourism. Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2012), for example, used TripAdvisor's (the world's largest travel site) discussion forum to explore how tourists perceive risks associated with four popular destinations. Such online platforms provide a wealth of information about customers' experiences and opinions about travel and destinations. Netnography has, thus, proven to be a natural

methodological choice for numerous studies on tourism experiences (Hsu *et al.*, 2009; Mkono *et al.*, 2013; Rageh *et al.*, 2013). Blogs have also been used as sources of customers' stories about tourism and travel (Woodside *et al.*, 2007).

Marketing research topics

Netnography has been used to study various marketing research topics that cut across the previously discussed marketing research fields (Table II). Netnographic enquiry is being increasingly used for studying all sorts of marketing topics, not only phenomena that exist exclusively online (e.g. online communities and e-word of mouth [e-WOM]). This review revealed that research on consumption experiences, and particularly destination branding, was often centered around services, while studies on co-creation frequently adopted a service perspective. For example, the topics of consumer identity, brand management and brand communities were rarely explored within a services context or from a service perspective.

Online communities

Online or virtual communities have been at the center of netnographic studies ever since the inception of netnography as a research method. Kozinets' (1997) seminal article about the subculture surrounding the television series *The X-Files* and its related online fan communities introduced the idea of the online community as a valuable source of information about consumers and their cultures. However, not all netnographic studies on online communities are aimed at understanding explicit consumer culture phenomena. Thomas and Peters (2011), for example, explored the role of the popular wedding online community Brides.com in brides' wedding dress purchase decisions. Moreover, Keeling *et al.*'s (2013) study of an online community of breast cancer sufferers illustrated how the community members negotiated their understandings of health-care services and medications. As online communities have become more popular and diverse, the customer information that marketing researchers can elicit from them has increased.

Consumption experiences

As customers share more of their experiences online, marketing researchers have found netnography to be increasingly useful for exploring these consumption-related experiences. Netnographic studies have researched a broad variety of consumption experiences in many different contexts. For example, Hamilton and Hewer (2009) explored the appeal of the experiences provided by salsa dancing through a netnographic analysis of an online salsa forum that attracts people from all over the world. In recent years, social media has grown in importance as a communication platform for

Table II Ten most popular marketing topics to be researched using netnography

Topic	Topic examples	No. papers (%)	Service focus (%)	Article examples
Online communities	Cyberculture, knowledge sharing, consumer learning	47 (14.7)	Services: 21.3 None: 59.6	Laing <i>et al.</i> (2011), Stewart Loane and D'Alessandro (2014), Rokka and Moisander (2009)
Consumption experiences	Experience creation, experience dimensions	41 (12.8)	Services: 2.4 None: 78.1	Kerrigan <i>et al.</i> (2014), Guesalaga <i>et al.</i> (2016), Hamilton and Hower (2009)
Brand communities	Brand relationships, anti-brand, social networks	28 (8.7)	Services: 25.0 None: 75.0	Hassan <i>et al.</i> (2016), Weijo <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Brand management	Product placement, brand ambiguity, luxury branding	23 (7.2)	Services: 13.0 None: 87.0	Brown and Patterson (2009), Quester and Fleck (2010), Nelson <i>et al.</i> (2004)
Co-creation	New product development, challenges, open innovation	21 (6.5)	Services: 95.2 None: 4.8	Kelleher <i>et al.</i> (2011), Gatzweiler <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Consumer identity	Identity construction, negotiation, and adaptation	17 (5.3)	Services: 0.0 None: 100.0	Pentina and Spears (2011), Hemetsberger (2005)
Authenticity	Perceived authenticity, authenticity negotiation	16 (5.0)	Services: 0.0 None: 100.0	Mkono (2012), Hartmann and Ostberg (2013), McArthur (2015)
Anti-consumption	Motive, stigma, activism, freeganism, simple living	13 (4.0)	Services: 30.7 None: 69.3	Nguyen <i>et al.</i> (2014)
Destination branding	Destination image formation, online destination image	12 (3.7)	Services: 0.0 None: 100.0	Dwivedi (2009)
e-WOM	Influence, trustworthiness, communication channels	10 (3.1)	Services: 10.0 None: 90.0	Andreasen and Streuikens (2009) Liang and Scammon (2011)
Other topics	Value, decision-making, emotions, storytelling	93 (29.0)	Services: 10.7 None: 89.3	Ertimur and Gilly (2012) Medberg and Heinonen (2014) Wu and Pearce (2016) Kjellberg <i>et al.</i> (2015)
Total		321 (100.0)		

customers who want to share experiences and express opinions. Misopoulos *et al.* (2014), therefore, could successfully use Twitter to identify critical elements of customers' service experiences in the airline industry.

Brand communities

Netnography has also become a tool for marketing researchers seeking to understand different brand-related phenomena from within these brand communities. For example, in an ethnography of three brand communities – Ford Bronco, Macintosh and Saab – Muñoz and O'Guinn (2001) discovered the importance of internet forums for brand communities. Since then, much research has been conducted on brand communities online with the help of netnography. Examples include co-creation (Cova *et al.*, 2015), value creation (Schau *et al.*, 2009), social networks (Zaglia, 2013), brand meaning creation (Broderick *et al.*, 2003) and rivalries within and between brand communities (Ewing *et al.*, 2013) and anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010).

Consumer identity

The phenomena of construction, negotiation and adaptation of consumers' identities have all been researched through netnographic enquiry. Netnography is a suitable method for studying different phenomena related to consumption and identities, as anonymous online environments are spaces in which consumers often feel comfortable sharing private reflections on themselves. For example, Pentina and Spears (2011) conducted a netnography of blogs and websites to explore what motivates young adults to acquire tattoos and their association with self-identity construction and the need for self-expression. Similarly, Lindblad and Ostberg (2011) used online forums in which Swedish youth communicate and interact to explore how identity among young consumers is largely formed by delimitations of what they do not identify with. As the authors pointed out, the internet offers an interactive space for consumers to construct and display their subcultural identities.

Brand management

Companies' efforts to analyze and plan how customers perceive their brands have expanded in scope as internet usage has developed rapidly over the years (Christodoulides, 2009). At the same time, the internet has become an important source of customer insights into brands and branding. Hence, marketing researchers have used netnographic enquiry to understand how customers perceive companies' brand management efforts. Nelson *et al.* (2004), for instance, analyzed electronic game players' online discussions about the effectiveness and appropriateness of product placement in computer games as a way for companies to promote their brands. Interestingly, many electronic game players accepted brands in games if they added realism.

Authenticity

In a world that many perceive as increasingly superficial, customers are seeking authenticity in products and services (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Tourist attractions are typical examples of market offerings that customers tend to evaluate on the basis of how "genuine" or "real" they are. Netnography is useful in revealing the phenomenon of authenticity in the marketplace, such as how customers' discussions online play a

role in the creation (or destruction) of the perceived authenticity of a product or service (Corciolani, 2014). Mkono (2013), in turn, used tourist reviews from TripAdvisor to explore what tourists at restaurants in Victoria Falls perceived as authentic African culture. As authenticity is largely a socially constructed phenomenon, today's online environment opens up new opportunities for researchers to understand customers' roles in the co-creation of the authenticity of market offerings.

Anti-consumption

Over the past decade, marketing researchers have started showing more interest in anti-consumption movements and subcultures. The phenomenon of anti-consumption is largely triggered by what many perceive as unsustainable consumption practices in many developed countries. Many of these movements are organized around online communities or forums in which members can discuss and share their thoughts. To uncover how such a group copes with the stigma attached to its practices (e.g. dumpster diving and consumption of disposed food), Nguyen *et al.* (2014) performed a netnographic study of three online Freegan forums. These online forums enabled the authors to access rich details about Freegans' belief systems and illustrate how these stigmatized individuals redirect stigma toward the normative culture as a stigma management strategy. Netnography has also been used to shed light on the complex mix of ideological, economic and psychological motivations of Freegans (Fernandez *et al.*, 2011) and their collective identity construction process (Pentina and Amos, 2011).

Co-creation

In recent years, the co-creation of value has been a popular and much-discussed topic within marketing theory. Value co-creation refers to the customer's participation in the creation of a firm's offering (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). As the internet has grown in importance as a platform for interaction and dialogue between customers and firms, netnography has also proven to be a useful research method for studying and understanding the phenomenon of co-creation. Netnographic enquiry has been used, for example, to explore how companies – through an open innovation approach – seek to co-create value with customers in online crowd-sourced communities (Kelleher *et al.*, 2011), how firms and customers co-create value in the luxury market (Tynan *et al.*, 2010) and ways in which co-creation can go wrong within online innovation communities, thus resulting in conflicts (Gebauer *et al.*, 2013).

E-word of mouth

The traditionally powerful phenomenon of e-WOM has become even more potent with the unprecedented possibilities of WOM spreading across the internet in seconds to millions of customers worldwide. Consequently, several marketing researchers have applied netnography in the study of e-WOM. Liang and Scammon (2011), for example, adopted netnography in their study of e-WOM on health social networking sites and revealed that more-informed community members provided less-informed members with advice, guidance and support. As e-WOM has a powerful effect on customers' choices of products and services, marketers often try to control and influence e-WOM. Kulmala *et al.* (2013) used netnography to study six popular Finnish fashion blogs to

understand this conflict between naturally occurring e-WOM and marketing-influenced e-WOM. As netnography provides guidelines for researching online phenomena, it has become a popular and successful research method for studying e-WOM.

Destination branding

The internet has become the main tourism marketing channel for states, municipalities, organizations and companies involved in the tourism industry. Today, managing and promoting a destination's online image is an important step in attracting tourists, especially international visitors, who tend not to have any previous experience of the region (Lund *et al.*, 2018). The internet, however, is not a one-way communication channel and encourages people to share experiences and opinions; this is particularly true for social media. Hence, netnography has been used to explore the resulting challenges of using the internet for destination image formation. Dwivedi (2009), for example, found that customers actively construct destination images via online travel message boards and that such destination images can be in sharp contrast to the "picture postcard" images promoted by destination-marketing organizations.

Other topics

Other marketing topics that have been explored with netnography include customer value (Medberg and Heinonen, 2014), customer-to-customer (C2C) interaction (Ekpo *et al.*, 2015), customer motivations (Wu and Pearce, 2016), customer tribes (Hamilton and Hewer, 2009), decision-making (Cross and Gilly, 2014) and cross-cultural consumption (Nelson and Otnes, 2005). Many of these marketing topics have been explored in service contexts or are relevant for service researchers in other ways. As Kozinets (1998) pointed out, netnography is not only limited to the study of online communities and cybercultures but also constitutes a useful tool for exploring various marketing topics. Today, valuable information related to most marketing topics can be found online. Marketing researchers have, therefore, found netnography to be a relevant tool for accessing and making sense of this online information. Marketing researchers have also applied netnography in many different ways in their studies on manifold topics, as will be discussed next.

Methodological applications

Marketing researchers have used netnography in various ways. Table III summarizes the applications of netnography in the analyzed articles in terms of the role of the researcher, use purpose, domain of data collection, content included, analysis and combination with other methods. These themes of variations in netnography's application emerged from the analysis of the reviewed articles and are not based on Kozinets' (2002, 2006, 2010, 2015) guidelines for netnographic studies. This is especially relevant because the research's aim was to illustrate the actual use of the method, not its intended use. The various applications are presented in the order of how frequently they appeared in the reviewed articles, with passive observer being the most common role of the researcher, exploratory research the most common use purpose, and so on. Netnography is a diverse and all-encompassing method that is used in various ways for different purposes (Table III). However, this study did not consider the percentage of total

papers associated with each form of application, as a netnographic study typically uses several of the presented forms of application, making calculating the percentage of total papers for each form of application irrelevant.

Role of the researcher

In netnographic marketing studies, researchers are either passive observers or active participants in the online forums they choose for data collection. Passive observers usually lurk around forums without informing the community about the research being conducted, while active participants often notify the community members about their research activities. As discussed earlier in this paper, arguments for overt and covert research strategies can be found in the netnography literature (Kozinets, 1998; Catterall and Maclaran, 2002; Langer and Beckman, 2005). This literature review, however, evinced that the vast majority of netnographic marketing studies adopt a passive observer position. This may not come as a surprise, as this position is the simplest, most convenient and most unobtrusive netnographic research approach.

Use purpose

Most of the reviewed articles used netnography as an exploratory research method or as a pilot study. For example, O'Sullivan *et al.* (2011) used netnography to explore how brand communities emerge, and Ismail (2011) adopted netnography to develop measurement scales for a large-scale quantitative study of customer experience and its dimensions. Moreover, many netnographic marketing studies seek cultural understanding of the studied phenomena. The in-depth nature of netnographic data enabled Leipämaa-Leskinen (2011), for example, to understand how meanings of body and identity are constructed in social interaction online when dieting. Finally, netnography has been used for illustrative purposes. Mkono *et al.* (2013), for example, used netnographic studies to provide illustrative examples of touristic food experiences.

Domain of data collection

Multitudinous online domains have been used to collect data in netnographic marketing studies. Unsurprisingly, common domains are online discussion forums and social networking sites (Broderick *et al.*, 2003; Braunsberger and Buckler, 2011; Rosenthal and Brito, 2017). In addition, review sites for tourism, travel destinations, restaurants, products and services (Yang and Fang, 2004; Oakes *et al.*, 2013; Baka, 2016) are popular domains for data collection for netnographers. The above-mentioned online platforms are customer-dominated, in the sense that users generate the content, but netnographic data can also involve company websites (Mkono, 2012) and other online platforms where firms generate the content (Sigala, 2012). Hartmann and Ostberg (2013), for example, included content from the official website of Swedish guitar manufacturer Hagstrom in their analysis of discursive struggles over brand authenticity.

Content included

Netnography allows marketing researchers to collect rich, timely and continuous naturalistic data (Rokka, 2010). Netnographic data are typically text-based, such as customers' online comments, discussions and reviews (Black, 2011). More in-depth textual data can often be found through online platforms, such as Web diaries (Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2011) and

Table III Overview of netnography's use in marketing research

Application	Description	Article examples
Role of researcher	Passive observer Active participant	Quinton and Harridge-March (2010) O'Sullivan <i>et al.</i> (2011)
Use purpose	Exploratory research Pilot study Cultural understanding Illustrative example	Chan and Li (2010) Gebauer <i>et al.</i> (2013) Kozinets and Handelman (2004) Kozinets (2002)
Domain of data collection	Online discussion forum Review sites Social networking sites Non-commercial websites Corporate websites Blogs E-mail	Laing <i>et al.</i> (2011) Yang and Fang (2004) Habibi <i>et al.</i> (2014) Hemetsberger (2005) Hartmann and Ostberg (2013) Mikkonen <i>et al.</i> (2011) Gabl and Hemetsberger (2012)
Content included	Text Pictures Videos	Langer and Beckman (2005) Croft (2013) Luedicke (2006)
Analysis	Thematic analysis Content analysis Discourse analysis	Muñiz and Schau (2007) Füller <i>et al.</i> (2008) Hong and Kim (2013)
Combination with other methods	Interviews Ethnography Observation Introspection Surveys Experiment Diaries	Walther and Sandlin (2011) McGrath <i>et al.</i> (2013) Broderick <i>et al.</i> (2003) Ekpo <i>et al.</i> (2015) Adjei <i>et al.</i> (2010) Keinan and Kivetz (2011) Takhar and Chitakunye (2012)

blogs (Gannon and Prothero, 2016). However, netnography is not limited to textual online data, and many netnographic marketing studies also include pictures and videos. Luedicke (2006), for example, downloaded and analyzed 200 pictures and 40 min of video content in his netnography on the role of social environments for the Hummer brand community. Similarly, Brown and Patterson (2010) included photos, podcasts and videos in the netnographic part of their study on the Harry Potter brand phenomenon.

Analysis

The present review illuminated that the most common analysis approach in netnographic marketing studies is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves coding and categorizing the data for emerging patterns and themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Spiggle, 1994). For example, Kozinets (1997) identified three foundational themes constituting the X-Philes subculture: “shared aesthetic tastes, shared experience of awe and mystery, and a shared drive to consume the symbols related to *The X-Files*” (p. 471). Netnographers also use qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis frequently. With qualitative content analysis, netnographers try to understand what information is conveyed, for example, on online discussion forums (Hvass and Munar, 2012; Podoshen, 2013). Netnographers using discourse analysis are more interested in the cultural meaning structures underlying customers’ online communication (Hemetsberger, 2005; Watson *et al.*, 2008) or how the language is used to construct customers’ realities (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2011; Hartmann and Ostberg, 2013).

Combination with other methods

More than half of the netnographic studies in this review combined netnography with other qualitative or quantitative methods. In fact, Kozinets (2002) suggested that marketing researchers who seek to generalize netnographic findings could also use other methods (e.g. interviews, focus groups, surveys or traditional ethnographies) for triangulation. A good example of this is Fisher and Smith’s (2011) study on value co-creation in brand communities, in which the authors combined netnography with ethnography and traditional interviews. Other studies have used netnographic enquiry as a complement or pre-study to larger quantitative studies. Chan and Li (2010), for example, used a netnographic study to understand reciprocity in C2C interactions in online communities and then validated their findings with a quantitative survey.

Implications for service research

The findings of this systematic review and analysis show that netnography has been used in different ways to research a variety of topics across different marketing fields. This review also reveals that service researchers have adopted netnography. Research in the service context, however, has used the method to a limited extent compared to, for example, consumer research. At the same time, services generate around 70-80 per cent of gross domestic product in most developed countries (CIA World Factbook, 2016) and reflect the typical type of everyday consumption discussed online by customers (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Basically, all sorts of service experiences

that customers openly and publicly share online can be used as input for netnography. Netnographic enquiry can help further service researchers' understanding of restaurant eating practices, for example, through online dietary discussion groups. Moreover, online forums devoted to personal finance can be used to explore how customers integrate different financial services and online tools into their personal financial management.

Netnography can also give service researchers insights into research topics beyond traditional services. The recent service perspective on business views service – rather than just intangible products – as the supportive process in which value is created for customers (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Gummesson *et al.*, 2010). From this service perspective, goods and services are merely resources designed to support customers' everyday lives. Through explorations of online discussions, netnography can effectively assist service researchers in their studies on customers' expectations and experiences of such supportive activities. In fact, almost any online space that reveals anything about customers' value creation processes should be an interesting research context for service researchers. Hence, netnography offers service researchers and practitioners unprecedented opportunities to access naturalistic online data about customers, making it an important method for future service research.

For service researchers interested in netnography, the following section presents the empirical, theoretical and methodological recommendations. The recommendations emerged from continuous discussion between the authors regarding under-researched areas within the netnographic marketing literature, with a focus on what is particularly interesting from a service marketing perspective. Generally, the recommendations relate to the ongoing discussion about future service research priorities (Table IV) initiated by Ostrom *et al.* (2015).

Empirical recommendations

This review reveals that the method of netnography has been used in different empirical contexts, such as tourism (Martin *et al.*, 2007), health care (Liang and Scammon, 2011) and financial services (Medberg and Heinonen, 2014). There is, however, considerable potential for the use of netnography in other areas of business. The following discussion presents empirical contexts that are particularly interesting for service researchers.

Sustainability

There are surprisingly few netnographic studies on sustainability. Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) defined sustainable marketing as marketing efforts that are competitively and ecologically sustainable. This area of marketing is particularly interesting for service researchers, as services often play an important role in developing sustainable business solutions (Ottman *et al.*, 2006). In this context, Belz and Peattie (2012) discussed three types of services: product-related, use-oriented and result-oriented. Product-related services optimize product use (e.g. courses on ecological driving). Use-oriented services replace ownership of products (e.g. car-sharing). Result-oriented services replace ownership and operation of products, and customers only pay for

the outcome (e.g. public transportation). In other words, a sustainable future economy will involve a transformation from sales of physical products to sales of services. Many new services are accessible via the internet and are frequently discussed by customers online. Netnography provides service researchers with tremendous opportunities to study this transformative process and its implications for customers and society.

Business-to-business

Netnography is frequently used in business-to-consumer (B2C) contexts, but no netnographic studies were identified in the context of business-to-business (B2B) marketing. This is not surprising when considering that consumers are much more prone to sharing their consumption stories online than, for example, employees or managers. In addition, accessing internal corporate online communication is difficult without the permission of the company. Despite these challenges, the B2B sector is an area for netnographic enquiry that should be explored, as it would offer service researchers many interesting topics to study. A netnography of a B2B service provider's intranet or internal chat could, for example, enable a deeper understanding of professional service managers' mind-sets and internal marketing efforts. Furthermore, online communities of practice, in which service professionals learn from each other in the specific domain of interest, is a promising area for future netnographic studies. Such professional online communities could reveal much about, for example, employee behavior and team dynamics in professional service contexts. Similar to traditional ethnographic studies in business contexts (Watson, 2011), a netnographic approach would have the potential to capture things of relevance that other methods would not.

International contexts

Netnography has been used extensively for studying tourism, but only a few studies have focused on other service-related international and/or cross-cultural phenomena. At the same time, the world is becoming increasingly globalized. Despite not explicitly studying international or cross-cultural phenomena, many netnographic studies have collected data from customers of different nationalities and cultures. Examples of this are netnographic studies exploring online reviews written by people throughout the world (Hamilton and Wagner, 2011; Pan and Zhang, 2011). The availability of cross-national websites and international social media platforms creates unprecedented opportunities for netnographic studies on topics related to service experiences among customers of different nationalities, regions and cultures. For example, online discussion forums that transcend national borders may provide an integrative perspective of different cultures and cultural meanings of services and service brands.

Digital technologies

Technological advancement and digitalization create an array of new online research contexts for service researchers. This study shows that almost all netnographies have been conducted on traditional areas of the internet, such as online communities, review sites and social networking sites. New digital technologies, including wearables, smart services and mobile apps, can generate valuable customer information for service researchers and practitioners (Wuenderlich *et al.*, 2015). Such

Table IV Recommendations and service research priorities

Recommendations	Service research priority (Ostrom et al., 2015)	Connection between recommendations and service research priorities
<i>Empirical recommendations</i>		
Sustainability	Improving well-being through transformative service	Netnography allows service researchers to study the emergence of sustainable and transformative services
B2B	Understanding organization and employee issues relevant to successful service	Netnography can help service researchers generate new insights about professional service providers and their customer relationships
International contexts	Understanding service in a global context	Netnography enables service researchers to learn about service experiences in different cultural contexts
Digital technologies	Leveraging technology to advance service	Netnography allows service researchers to examine how smart services and the Internet of things can enhance the customer experience
<i>Theoretical recommendations</i>		
Online conflicts	Enhancing the service experience	Netnography allows service researchers to participate in, and learn from, the activities and sometimes diverging opinions in online customer communities
Service ecosystems	Developing service networks and systems	Netnography enables service researchers to study actors and relationships within service ecosystems
Customers' mental models	Understanding value creation	Netnography can aid service researchers in understanding service customers' mental models and their activities as resource integrators
Online decision-making	Enhancing the service experience	Netnography allows service researchers to explore customer journeys across complex service offerings, touch points, and channels
<i>Methodological recommendations</i>		
New methodological combinations	Understanding value creation	By combining netnography with other methods, service researchers may generate an additional dimension of understanding of value creation
Non-text content	Understanding value creation	By including non-text content in their netnographic analyses, service researchers can elicit a more complete picture of value creation activities
New domains of data collection	Leveraging technology to advance service	By exploring new social networking sites and apps, service researchers can find new and interesting domains of netnographic data collection
Longitudinal netnographies	Enhancing the service experience	By undertaking longitudinal netnographies, service researchers can explore the dynamics of customers' service experiences over longer periods of time

digital technologies extend the boundaries of netnography and service research. As more personal devices get connected to the internet and to each other, opportunities for generating detailed customer insights increase (McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2012). Such data are likely to be more difficult to retrieve unobtrusively than information from traditional areas of the internet (e.g. public online discussion forums). Seeking informed consent from the people being studied, therefore, becomes more important than ever before (Kozinets, 2002). In addition to obtaining permission to access data from people's smart devices, service researchers can equip selected informants with such technology for use in their everyday lives and still elicit naturalistic data.

Theoretical recommendations

This study reveals that netnography has been used to investigate a variety of online and offline marketing phenomena, such as online communities (Thomas and Peters, 2011), consumption experiences (Hamilton and Hewer, 2009) and brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). The analysis results indicate that as the method of netnography develops and matures, even more marketing research topics will be studied through netnographic enquiry. Next, service-related topics that have yet to be explored through netnography, and thus present opportunities for service researchers, are discussed. The topics also touch on societally important issues that have implications for how society functions beyond the consumption setting.

Online conflicts

Most of the reviewed netnographic studies focused on customer conformity and similarity within specific online forums. The traditional online brand community is a typical example of a context in which members share opinions, interests, rituals, practices and subcultural traits (Kozinets, 1997; Schau et al., 2009). However, conflicts also arise in such online communities (Sibai et al., 2014), and if researchers move out of these often tightly knit communities, online conflicts among customers become even more common. In particular, social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube reveal a variety of conflicting opinions about common products and services. As Bou-Franch and Blitvich (2014) indicated, these online platforms offer researchers unprecedented access to the unfolding of conflicts. In addition to online conflicts between customers, conflicts arise between customers and service providers (on various online platforms). As a counterweight to the many studies on the heterogeneous practices of online communities, more netnographic research should be done into the different types of conflicts online. Such disagreements can help service researchers understand how customers' service experiences differ, the reasons for this diversity and the consequences.

Service ecosystems

Netnographic studies often focus on how customers relate to a particular product or brand. In reality, however, products and brands are intertwined in, and dependent upon, large service ecosystems. A service ecosystem refers to a relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors that are connected by shared institutional logics and mutual value creation through service exchange (Lusch and Vargo,

2014). An example of a service ecosystem is a network of health-care providers. However, the research on service ecosystems is still in its infancy (Chandler and Lusch, 2014; Vargo et al., 2015). Hence, more knowledge is needed of, for example, how customers make sense of the service ecosystems that surround them and how their perceptions and experiences might differ from those of other actors (e.g. firms and governments) involved in these systems. In addition, the relationships between customers' own networks (e.g. families, organizations and communities) and service ecosystems require further research (Epp and Price, 2011). As the structures of such networks and service systems often are visible online, netnography is a useful tool for this area of service research.

Customers' mental models

Much of the netnographic research has focused on different aspects of consumer culture and behavior. However, there are also opportunities for netnographic research into consumer psychology, and especially into service customers' mental models. The current knowledge of customers' mental models is essentially limited to the work of Christiansen and Olson (2002), who demonstrated that mental models are a mix of cognitive (i.e. beliefs) and emotional (i.e. feelings) components and are activated by different consumption situations. At the same time, the mental models of business managers have attracted considerable research attention (Santos and Garcia, 2006; Maignan and Lukas, 1997; Gary and Wood, 2011). Moreover, research in the B2B service setting has demonstrated that the mental models of sellers can differ substantially from those of buyers (Strandvik et al., 2012). Therefore, an important avenue for future research would be to explore possible discrepancies between the mental models of service customers and service managers in B2C markets. Netnographic data can greatly assist in such studies, as they reveal what customers think, feel and do, as well as the reasoning behind this.

Online decision-making

Despite the fact that much of customers' decision-making has moved online, very few netnographic studies have been conducted on online-related aspects of customers' decision-making processes. An exception is a study by Hernandez and Vicdan (2014), who explored blogs and video-gaming websites to gain deeper insight into the factors that influence the decision to pre-order new video games. Yet, there is wide recognition among marketing scholars that online forums, review sites, social media, mobile devices, smart services, wearables and similar options are increasingly changing the process of customer decision-making. Key questions that netnographic research could help answer are, for example, how the current digitalization changes decision-making and service customers' journeys to purchase, how customers manage online information overload and the influence of omnichannel marketing on their decision-making processes. Online decision-making is becoming an increasingly important area for service providers to understand and manage; hence, more netnographic studies on this topic are encouraged.

Methodological recommendations

This review of netnographic studies shows that marketing researchers have used netnography in various ways. Several

themes of variation in how netnography has been applied emerged from the analysis; they include the role of the researcher, use purpose, domain of data collection, content included, analysis and combination with other methods. The review indicated that the use of this method has transformed from the original principles developed by Kozinets (2015). Indeed, some flexibility may be needed, as the main aim of a study should always guide its research design (Patton, 2002; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). To that end, there may be alternative ways of designing future netnographies. In the following section, therefore, methodological recommendations are offered for service researchers who are planning to conduct netnographic studies.

New methodological combinations

Netnography has been combined with several methods, such as ethnography (McGrath *et al.*, 2013), interviews (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2005), observation (Podoshen, 2013) and surveys (Chan and Li, 2010). In today's world, with the increasing dynamism and online social interaction, it often makes sense to combine traditional offline methods with netnography. Such combinations can generate insights beyond what the original methods themselves could produce. However, there are many research approaches that have not yet been combined with netnography. Netnography could be successfully combined with, for example, grounded theory, narrative research, action research, case studies, focus groups, feminist research and critical research. In an increasingly digitalized world, where the lines between offline and online experiences are blurred in numerous ways, many studies using these research approaches could benefit from including a netnographic dimension in their research. As mixed-methods approaches have proven to be useful in marketing (Bahl and Milne, 2006; Harrison and Reilly, 2011), more such netnographic research is encouraged.

Non-text content

As pictures and videos gain popularity as means of online communication, future netnographers should also explore and use this type of non-text content. Analyzing online communication, not only through text but also through pictures and video, can give researchers a larger and more complete picture of the phenomenon under study. Kedzior (2014), for example, gathered all of these types of data from "second life" in his study on customers' experiences of digital worlds. Moreover, photos and videos produced and shared online by customers themselves provide great opportunities for service researchers to understand different service offerings from the customer's perspective. When reporting such research findings, it is important to also include the visual data and find a suitable balance between images and text (Ball and Smith, 1992). Audio material is also worth considering. In addition to text, videos and photos, Healy and Beverland (2013) collected digital audio recordings from relevant websites in their study on the furry subculture. The use of textual, visual and audio sources of data allowed the authors to gain a holistic view of this subculture's online behavior.

New domains of data collection

Most netnographic marketing studies are conducted on traditional online discussion forums. As the uses of the internet have evolved over time, so have the domains of data collection

for netnography. For example, different review sites now constitute an important source of information for service customers and have become useful domains for data collection in netnographic studies (Hamilton and Wagner, 2011; Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2012). Moreover, as the social media trend continues to grow, many social networking sites have developed into very interesting platforms for netnographic research. Facebook has been used in some netnographic studies (Kelleher *et al.*, 2011; Ewing *et al.*, 2013; Habibi *et al.*, 2014), but service researchers would benefit from closely examining other social networking sites, such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr. In addition, mobile apps, such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, offer new and interesting domains for netnographic data collection. The mobile context becomes increasingly relevant for netnographic research as mobile internet use grows rapidly across the world.

Longitudinal netnography

Netnographic studies typically identify one or more appropriate online domain (s) for data collection and then follow what happens on the selected domain (s) for a relatively short period of time (e.g. weeks) or retroactively collect a stream of messages, postings, reviews and other content. Russell and Schau (2014) and Weijs *et al.* (2014) are among the few researchers in this review that adopted a long-term longitudinal research approach. Considering that many online platforms facilitate following how service experiences evolve over time (e.g. medical treatment or financial advice/negotiation), it is surprising that more service researchers have not seized this opportunity. Service researchers should, therefore, consider undertaking longitudinal netnographies. Longitudinal research offers the possibility of capturing and understanding changes in customers' processes, but it is seldom used because of the time and cost involved (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Online longitudinal studies, however, require far fewer resources than traditional offline longitudinal studies. Finally, netnography can constitute a valuable longitudinal part of a traditional qualitative study or complement an offline longitudinal study.

Implications for service practice

This review and analysis of netnographic marketing research also has several implications for service managers. As customers bring their offline identities, values, meanings and other characteristics online (Dumitricia and Gaden, 2009), netnography makes a valuable contribution to the market research toolbox for companies. Netnographic enquiry allows service firms to access unelicited and naturalistic data from a variety of online platforms, such as internet discussion forums, review sites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest (Croft, 2013; Healy and Beverland, 2013; Podoshen, 2013). Furthermore, networked gamespaces, instant messaging chats and new forms of mobile communication technologies (e.g. smartphone apps) are interesting places for future netnographies (Kozinets, 2006). Many of the newer online platforms offer large amounts of visual data. Pictures and videos can be powerful complements to traditional textual online data. Hence, netnography is a flexible method that can be adapted for market research in most virtual arenas.

By observing and interacting with customers online, service firms can generate novel customer insights (Kozinets, 2018). Traditional methods, such as focus groups, surveys and interviews, can often be leading and might not always be optimal for revealing the customer’s logic regarding the service in question (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010, Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Conversely, netnographic research provides a window into the everyday lives and realities of customers (Kozinets, 2015). Such insights are particularly important for two areas of business: innovation and advertising. Successful service innovation and development require a thorough understanding of customers’ explicit and implicit needs (Griffin and Hauser, 1993; Leonard and Rayport, 1997). Netnography can help service providers learn about how customers use products and services in the course of their everyday routines and consequently uncover needs that customers themselves may not recognize. Similarly, successful advertising is grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the target group, and netnography provides a unique way for service firms to learn about the language, meanings and practices of the groups of customers with whom they want to communicate (Kozinets, 2006).

Netnography can also be a useful tool for scanning the environment in which a business is operating. Netnographic enquiry can be particularly suitable for service firms endeavoring to understand and address phenomena such as conflicts, tensions, resistance and activism related to their operations or brands. Many customers express their ideological or political convictions through consumption (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012) and often use the internet to raise awareness of why they choose or reject certain products and services (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2015). Besides enhancing service providers’ understanding of such phenomena, netnography can provide a tool for initiating an online dialogue with dissatisfied customers. Research has shown that responding to online criticism in a responsible way is a much more successful strategy than remaining passive (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Xia, 2013). Through netnographic enquiry, service firms can also learn much about markets they are considering entering. Transcending nearly all geographical borders, the internet is an important tool for international market research. For companies already operating globally, netnographic research can be a way to gain deeper insights into, for example, cross-cultural differences in perceptions of their brands and services.

However, it is also important for companies to recognize the challenges associated with netnographic research. Table V summarizes several key questions to be considered before using netnography. Netnography takes more time and requires more skill than traditional customer satisfaction surveys, feedback forms or online polls. Kozinets (2006, p. 282) even stated that “it takes an experienced and adept ethnographer to be a good netnographer.” Moreover, it is important to emphasize the risk of irritating or angering people (King, 1996). Netnographic research ethics is complicated by the fact that the internet is neither public nor private and contains not only text and data but also digital “copies” of people’s identities and selves (Kozinets, 2015). Customers may become upset or feel that their privacy has been violated if companies use their online texts, pictures and discussions without securing their permission. To avoid such problems, Kozinets (2002, 2015) recommended that researchers disclose their presence and obtain permission before quoting any

Table V Considerations for managerial use of netnography in market research

Key questions	Considerations
What research should be done?	What is the research objective? What information is needed? What other methods could be used instead?
How should the research be done?	Should netnography be combined with other methods? Is passive observation sufficient, or is active participation preferable? How will the data be collected and analyzed? Is textual information sufficient, or should other types of data be retrieved?
Where should the research be done?	Which are the most suitable online domains for data collection? What are the pros and cons of different online domains? Should there be triangulation across different domains or in-depth study of one domain?
Who should do the research, and who should be researched?	Who should be responsible for data collection and analysis? Do existing staff have sufficient knowledge about ethnography? Should existing or potential customers be studied? Should actors other than customers be studied?
When should the research be done?	When in time should the study be conducted? What should be the length of the study? Should it be a one-time collection of data or a long-term longitudinal research process?

specific postings. Even if companies rarely publish collected data, practitioners should still be as transparent as possible in any researched online environment.

Controversies regarding the use of netnography

This study indicated that many marketing researchers have diverged from the original intentions of netnography. Very few of the reviewed studies followed the methodological guidelines outlined by Kozinets (2002, 2006, 2010, 2015). Although only studies that used the label “netnography” were included in this review, the sample contained a broad set of applications of the method. Netnography has been used in various ways, and this has resulted in a dilution and diversification of the principles of netnography. Some studies were strongly focused on ethnography with some online elements (e.g. O’Sullivan *et al.*, 2011; McGrath *et al.*, 2013), whereas other studies were more strongly focused on quantifying online textual data (e.g. Yang and Fang, 2004; Pan and Zhang, 2011). Kozinets (2015) also noted this fragmentation of netnography.

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There are also several ethical dilemmas and challenges related to the research domain, participation consent and privacy that researchers need to consider (Roy *et al.*, 2015). Perhaps the most debated is Kozinets' (2002) ethical guidelines that a netnographer should always:

- fully disclose his/her presence and intentions;
- ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of informants;
- seek and incorporate feedback from online community members; and
- seek permission from community members before directly quoting any specific postings in the research.

Langer and Beckman (2005), for example, maintained that such guidelines make sense for studying private online communication, but are far too rigorous for researching publicly available internet forums. If anybody can participate in the online communication without any restrictions, it can be defined as public communication and hence is comparable to content analysis of conventional mass media, such as newspapers and magazines (Langer and Beckman, 2005).

In other words, researchers intending to use netnography must be aware that there are few shared criteria for applying and interpreting netnography. This situation creates problems for ensuring quality in research and causes confusion. Therefore, a critical issue for future research is to raise awareness of the diverging adherence of prior studies to the original principles of netnography (Kozinets, 2002). A key challenge for service researchers is, thus, to understand the guidelines of netnography and the ongoing debate about the diverse applications of netnography. Future studies must establish how the principles can be adapted and adopted for service research.

Conclusions

This study involved analyzing 321 netnographic marketing studies published between 1997 and 2017 and providing a comprehensive overview and synthesis of the use of netnography in marketing. In doing so, this study adds to and extends previous research on netnography as a research method (e.g. Kozinets, 1998, 2002; Sandlin, 2007; Bartl *et al.*, 2016; Costello *et al.*, 2017). While Costello *et al.* (2017), for example, focused on how netnography should be used and emphasized Kozinets (2002, 2006, 2010, 2015) methodological guidelines, the focus here was on mapping out what has been done under the label of netnography in the field of marketing and what future opportunities exist for service researchers.

The findings of this study reveal an increase in the popularity of netnography in marketing research, which arguably reflects the intensified online activity of customers (Dumitricia and Gaden, 2009). Customers' lives are increasingly moving online, and netnography provides a useful tool for service researchers who wish to follow customers into the digital world (Kozinets, 2006; Rokka, 2010). As the first generation of "digital natives" grows up to become the customers of tomorrow (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Thomas, 2011), the interest in, and need for, netnography among service researchers should continue to increase.

This study reveals that a variety of marketing research fields and topics have been researched through netnography over the years. More than a quarter of these studies were carried out in a

services context and about one-sixth involved a service perspective. Unsurprisingly, different aspects of online consumer behavior and culture have been atop the netnographic research agenda. The findings also show a diversity of ways in which marketing researchers have applied netnography. This variation in netnographic studies shows a flexible qualitative method with multiple uses for marketing researchers. On the basis of this review and analysis, this article has presented and discussed marketing fields, marketing topics and methodological applications that provide fresh avenues for netnographic service research.

In addition to empirical research, there should be more methodological research on netnography. As evident from this review, concurrently with the increased use of the method, marketing researchers have strayed from Kozinets' (2002, 2006, 2010, 2015) methodological guidelines. Today, the scope of what is labeled as netnography is much broader than originally envisioned by Kozinets and involves both overt and covert research strategies (Langer and Beckman, 2005). According to Costello *et al.* (2017), researchers who adopt a passive non-participatory approach often miss opportunities for co-creating knowledge in online communities and social media spaces. Hence, there is a need for a renewed discussion of the methodology of netnography. It is also important to remember that different research questions require different netnographic approaches. For example, none of the recommended marketing topics could be explored with a "one-size-fits-all" netnographic research design. Therefore, more discussion on when certain types of methodological applications are and are not suitable is encouraged.

To conclude, it is noteworthy that this study faced certain limitations. Even though systematic literature reviews are regarded as more objective than traditional literature reviews (Egger *et al.*, 2008), there is still room for the researcher's subjective influence. For example, when using the descriptors "netnography OR netnographic" in the literature search, some relevant articles may have been excluded if they used similar but different keywords, such as "digital ethnography," "virtual ethnography," "online ethnography" or "cyber-ethnography". Furthermore, including additional databases in the search might have generated more netnographic marketing studies to analyze. Finally, the decision to include only articles written in English and published in marketing journals means that interesting netnographic studies in conference papers, doctoral dissertations and book chapters and in other languages might have been overlooked. Despite its limitations, this study provides a platform for future netnographic service research.

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