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The author develops “netnography” as an online marketing research technique for providing consumer insight. Netnography is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. As a method, netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews. It provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups. The author provides guidelines that acknowledge the online environment, respect the inherent flexibility and openness of ethnography, and provide rigor and ethics in the conduct of marketing research. As an illustrative example, the author provides a netnography of an online coffee newsgroup and discusses its marketing implications.

## The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities

Consumers making product and brand choices are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication for information on which to base their decisions.<sup>1</sup> Besides perusing advertising and corporate Web sites, consumers are using newsgroups, chat rooms, e-mail list servers, personal World Wide Web pages, and other online formats to share ideas, build communities, and contact fellow consumers who are seen as more objective information sources. Although they are popularly called “virtual communities” (Rheingold 1993), the term “virtual” might misleadingly imply that these communities are less “real” than physical communities (Jones 1995). Yet as Kozinets (1998, p. 366) points out, “these social groups have a ‘real’ existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior” (see also Muniz

and O’Guinn 2001). To maintain the useful distinction of computer-mediated social gathering, I use the term “online communities” to refer to these Internet-based forums.

Motion pictures, sports, music, automobiles, fast food, toys, consumer electronics, computers and peripherals, software, cigars, beer, coffee, and many other products and services are discussed in online communities whose importance is being increasingly recognized by contemporary marketers (see, e.g., Armstrong and Hagel 1996; Bulik 2000; Hagel and Armstrong 1997; Kozinets 1999; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; White 1999). In the past few years, marketing firms such as Cyveillance, eWatch, NetCurrents, and GenuOne and consumer services such as Epinions.com, PlanetFeedback, Bizrate.com, and eComplaints.com have been formed to take advantage of opportunities posed by cross-consumer electronic communication.

The reason behind this marketing interest is twofold. First, marketers recognize the increasing importance of the Internet and of consumers who are active in online communities. Almquist and Roberts (2000, p. 18) find that the major factor influencing positive brand equity for one brand over another is consumer advocacy. Online communities are contexts in which consumers often partake in discussions whose goals include attempts to inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brands (Kozinets 1999; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Second, one of the major purposes of marketing research is to identify and understand the tastes, desires, relevant symbol systems, and decision-making influences of particular consumers and consumer groups. As the advent of networked computing is opening

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<sup>1</sup>For example, surveys of adults who use online services indicate that 36% of them access newsgroups and 25% visit chat rooms (Visgaitis 1996), and these numbers appear to be growing (Jones 1999). Reid’s (1995) analysis of Arbitron data provides a much higher figure: 71.6% of all Internet users assess newsgroups.

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new opportunities for market-oriented consumer interaction, it is also opening up opportunities for marketing researchers to study the tastes, desires, and other needs of consumers who interact in online communities.

Marketing researchers use a variety of methods to study consumers. Qualitative methods are particularly useful for revealing the rich symbolic world that underlies needs, desires, meanings, and choice (see, e.g., Levy 1959). Currently, the most popular qualitative methods are focus groups, personal interviews, and "market-oriented ethnography" (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Although market-oriented ethnography is an important technique that focuses on the behavior of the people who constitute a market for a product or service, it is a time-consuming and elaborate method that requires considerable skill and substantial investments of researcher resources. Because it involves in-person researcher participant observation, market-oriented ethnography is also an intentionally and unavoidably intrusive method that precludes unobtrusive observation of naturally situated consumer behavior. Face-to-face focus groups (Calder 1977) and personal interviews (Thompson 1997) are less time consuming, simpler, and more popular qualitative marketing research techniques than ethnography is. However, their obtrusiveness, artificiality, and decontextualization of cultural marketing information are considerably greater than that of ethnography.

This article extends the strengths of market-oriented ethnography by demonstrating how it can be efficaciously conducted online using existing online communities, often in an unobtrusive context. The novel, computer-mediated, textual, nonphysical, social cue-impoverished context of online communities may have hampered the rigorous investigation of these communities by researchers. Over the past several years, many anthropologists, sociologists, and qualitative marketing researchers have written about the need to specially adapt existing ethnographic research techniques to the many cultures and communities that are emerging through online communications (see, e.g., Escobar 1994; Grossnickle and Raskin 2000; Hakken 1999; Jones 1999; Kozinets 1999; Miller and Slater 2000). Although it does not break entirely new ground methodologically, this article addresses this important need by providing researchers with a rigorous methodology that is adapted to the unique characteristics of online communities.

"Netnography," or ethnography on the Internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications. As a marketing research technique, netnography uses the information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups. Compared with traditional and market-oriented ethnography, netnography is far less time consuming and elaborate. Another contrast with traditional and market-oriented ethnography is that netnography is capable of being conducted in a manner that is entirely unobtrusive (though it need not be). Compared with focus groups and personal interviews, netnography is far less obtrusive, because it is conducted using observations of consumers in a context that is not fabricated by the marketing researcher. It also can provide information in a manner that is less costly and more timely than focus groups and personal interviews. Netnography provides marketing

researchers with a window into naturally occurring behaviors, such as searches for information by and communal word of mouth between consumers. Because it is both naturalistic and unobtrusive—a unique combination not found in any other marketing research method—netnography allows continuing access to informants in a particular online social situation. This access may provide important opportunities for consumer–researcher and consumer–marketer relationships. The limitations of netnography draw from its more narrow focus on online communities, the need for researcher interpretive skill, and the lack of informant identifiers present in the online context that leads to difficulty generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample. Marketing researchers wishing to generalize the findings of a netnography of a particular online group to other groups must therefore apply careful evaluations of similarity and employ multiple methods for triangulation.

In this article's first section, the method of netnography is explained, and particular attention is paid to its relative strengths and weaknesses compared with in-person qualitative techniques. The second section provides an illustrative example that uses the information on a popular coffee newsgroup to gather consumer insights that may inform marketing practice.

#### THE METHOD OF NETNOGRAPHY

##### *Ethnography and Netnography*

Ethnography is an anthropological method that has gained popularity in sociology, cultural studies, consumer research, and various other social scientific fields. The term refers both to fieldwork, or the study of the distinctive meanings, practices, and artifacts of particular social groups, and to the representations based on such a study. Ethnography is an inherently open-ended practice. It is based on participation and observation in particular cultural arenas as well as acknowledgment and employment of researcher reflexivity. That is, it relies heavily on "the acuity of the researcher-as-instrument" (Sherry 1991, p. 572) and is more visibly affected by researcher interests and skills than most other types of research. Ethnography also uses metaphorical, hermeneutic, and analytic interpretation of data (see, e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1997). Ethnography is grounded in knowledge of the local, the particularistic, and the specific. Although it is often used to generalize, it is most often used to gain a type of particularized understanding that has come to be termed "grounded knowledge" (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The rich qualitative content of ethnography's findings and the open-endedness that makes it adaptable to a variety of circumstances have led to its popularity as a method. This flexibility has allowed ethnography to be used for more than a century to represent and understand the behaviors of people who belong to almost every race, nationality, religion, culture, and age group—and even behaviors of some nonhuman species groupings. Even with this impressive body of ethnographic work, however, it can be said that no two ethnographies have ever been conducted in exactly the same manner. This flexibility is one of ethnography's greatest strengths. Ethnographic methods have been continually refashioned to suit particular fields of scholarship, research questions, research sites, times, researcher preferences, and cultural groups.

Although ethnography is inherently an open-ended form of inquiry, ethnographers choose from related field procedures and often confront similar methodological issues. Common ethnographic procedures that help shape researchers' participant observation include (1) making cultural entrée, (2) gathering and analyzing data, (3) ensuring trustworthy interpretation, (4) conducting ethical research, and (5) providing opportunities for culture member feedback. Thorough accounts of these procedures exist for ethnographies conducted in face-to-face situations (see, e.g., Fetterman 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Jorgensen 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985). However, networked computing is a novel medium for social exchange between consumers that changes the particulars of each of these research procedures, concomitantly allowing an unprecedented level of access to the heretofore unobservable behaviors of interacting consumers. It is important, therefore, to provide a general description of the steps and procedures involved in conducting netnography as they are adapted to these unique online contingencies. Although netnography, like ethnography, is inherently flexible and adaptable to the interests and skill set of the individual marketing researcher, these steps may act as a guide to researchers who are interested in rigorously applying the method to their own research. This combination of more rigorous online guidelines combined with an innate flexibility is novel, yet still faithful to scholarly depictions of traditional ethnographic methodology (e.g., Fetterman 1989; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Jorgensen 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985). After discussing these netnographic procedures, I proceed to illustrate the richness of the technique with a short example of marketing research conducted in an online group devoted to the discussion of coffee.

*Entrée.* There are two initial steps that market researchers will find useful as preparation for conducting a netnography. First, researchers must have specific marketing research questions and then identify particular online forums appropriate to the types of questions that are of interest to them. Second, they must learn as much as possible about the forums, the groups, and the individual participants they seek to understand. Unlike in traditional ethnographies, in the identification of relevant communities, online search engines will prove invaluable.

Structurally, at least five different types of online community can be distinguished that may be useful to the conduct of market-oriented netnography (for more detail, see Kozinets 1999). First are boards, which function as electronic bulletin boards (also called newsgroups, usegroups, or usenet groups). These are often organized around particular products, services, or lifestyles, each of which may have important uses and implications for marketing researchers who are interested in particular consumer topics (e.g., McDonald's, Sony Playstation, beer, travel to Europe, skiing). Many consumer-oriented newsgroups have more than 100,000 readers, and some have more than one million (Reid 1995). Currently, google.com has an excellent newsgroup search engine (acquired from deja.com).

Second are independent Web pages as well as Web rings, which are composed of thematically linked World Wide Web pages. Web pages such as epinions (www.epinions.com) provide online community resources for consumer-to-consumer exchanges. Yahoo!'s consumer advocacy listings also provide useful listing of independent consumer Web

pages. Yahoo! also has an excellent directory of Web rings (www.dir.webring.yahoo.com). Third are lists (also called listservs, after the software program), which are e-mail mailing lists united by common themes (e.g., art, diet, music, professions, toys, educational services, hobbies). Some good search engines of lists are egroups.com and listz.com.

Finally, multiuser dungeons and chat rooms tend to be considerably less market oriented in their focus, containing information that is often fantasy oriented, social, sexual, and relational in nature. General search engines (e.g., Yahoo! or excite) provide good directories of these communities. Dungeons and chat rooms may still be of interest to marketing researchers (see, e.g., White 1999) because of their ability to provide insight into particular themes (e.g., certain industry, demographic, or lifestyle segments). However, many marketing 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 than the more social information available in dungeons and chat rooms. In general, combining search engines (e.g., a World Wide Web search engine such as Yahoo! with a newsgroup search engine such as groups.google.com) will often provide the best results for locating specific topics of interest. It is also important to note that a broad and thorough computerized search may be required, as the topic of interest may be categorized at varying levels of abstraction, for example, at the brand, product category, or activity type level.

When suitable online communities have been identified, the researcher can judge among them using criteria that are specifically suitable to the investigation. In general, online communities should be preferred that have (1) a more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group; (2) higher "traffic" of postings; (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) more detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. These evaluations entail an important adaptation of ethnography to the online context, and their use distinguishes the method of netnography from traditional ethnography. All the online forums (groups, rings, lists, dungeons, and rooms) may provide useful access to people who are self-segmented by a certain type of lifestyle or market orientation, which researchers may, at their option, translate into private (one-on-one) online, real-time interviews (see, e.g., Hamman 1996). Before initiating contact or data collection, the marketing researcher should be familiar with the characteristics (group membership, market-oriented behaviors, interests, and language) of the online communities.

*Data collection and analysis.* After online communities are chosen, marketing researchers are ready to begin collecting data for their netnography. There are at least two important elements of this data collection: (1) the data the researchers directly copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and (2) the data the researchers inscribe regarding their observations of the community and its members, interactions, and meanings. As a distinct advantage over traditional ethnographers, netnographers benefit from the nearly automatic transcription of downloaded documents. With the addition of vastly lower search costs than face-to-face ethnography (particularly in purely observational forms of netnography), data are often



plentiful and easy to obtain. In this environment, the netnographer's choices of which data to save and which to pursue are important and should be guided by the research question and available resources (e.g., the number of online members willing to be interviewed, the ability of online members to express themselves, time, researcher skill). Dealing judiciously with instantaneous information overload is a much more important problem for netnographers than for traditional ethnographers.

Because the online medium is famous (and infamous) for its casual social elements, messages may be classified first as primarily social or informational and as primarily on-topic or off-topic (when the topic is the research question of interest). Although researchers might include all the data in a first pass or "grand tour" interpretation, they will generally want to save their most intense analytical efforts for the primarily informational and on-topic messages.

The posters of online messages may also be categorized. Some novel categories for classifying them on the basis of their level of involvement with the online community and the consumption activity have been outlined by Kozinets (1999). *Tourists* lack strong social ties and deep interest in the activity (they often post casual questions). *Minglers* have strong social ties but minimal interest in the consumption activity. *Devotees* have strong consumption interests but few attachments to the online group. Finally, *insiders* have strong ties to the online group and to the consumption activity and tend to be long-standing and frequently referenced members. For marketing research that is useful for marketing strategy formulation, the devotees and the insiders represent the most important data sources. Preliminary research reveals that devoted, enthusiastic, actively involved, and sophisticated user segments are represented in online communities by insiders and devotees (Kozinets 1999). It is also useful to note that online communities themselves tend to propagate the development of loyalty and (sometimes) heavy usage by socially reinforcing consumption. Therefore, marketing researchers interested in online word of mouth and influence may find it useful to track how tourists and minglers are socialized and "upgraded" to insiders and devotees in market-oriented online communities (Kozinets 1999).

As with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), data collection should continue as long as new insights on important topical areas are still being generated. For purposes of precision, some netnographers may wish to keep close count of the exact number of messages and Web pages read (in practice, an extremely difficult measurement), as well as how many distinct participants were involved. The strength of netnography is its particularistic ties to specific online consumer groups and the revelatory depth of their online communications. Thus, interesting and useful conclusions might be drawn from a relatively small number of messages, if these messages contain sufficient descriptive richness and are interpreted with considerable analytic depth and insight. A time-tested and recommended way to help develop this insight is to write reflective field notes. In these field notes, netnographers record their own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions, and personal emotions that occur during the research. These written reflections often prove invaluable to contextualizing the data and are a recommended procedure. However, in a sharp break from traditional ethnography, a researcher could conduct a

rigorous netnography using only observation and downloads and without writing a single field note.

As data analysis commences (often concomitant with data collection), the netnographer must contextualize the online data, which often proves to be more challenging in the social cues-impooverished online context of netnography. Software solutions such as the QSR NVivo and Atlas.ti qualitative analysis packages can expedite coding, content analysis, data linking, data display, and theory-building functions (Paccagnella 1997; Richards and Richards 1994). However, classification and coding of data are important concerns that inevitably involve trading off symbolic richness for construct clarity (Van Maanen 1988). Perhaps even more than with ethnography, some of the most useful interpretations of netnographic data take advantage of its contextual richness and come as a result of penetrating metaphoric and symbolic interpretation (Levy 1959; Sherry 1991; Thompson 1997) rather than meticulous classification.

*Providing trustworthy interpretation.* For tracking the marketing-related behaviors of online communities, netnography is a stand-alone method. It is a way to understand the discourse and interactions of people engaging in computer-mediated communication about market-oriented topics. During the course of netnographic data collection and analysis, the market researcher must follow conventional procedures so that the research is reasonable or trustworthy (note that in most qualitative consumer research, the concept of "trustworthiness" is used rather than "validity," see Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

Netnography is based primarily on the observation of textual discourse, an important difference from the balancing of discourse and observed behavior that occurs during in-person ethnography (cf. Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Informants therefore may be presumed to be presenting a more carefully cultivated and controlled self-image. The uniquely mutable, dynamic, and multiple online landscape mediates social representation and renders problematic the issue of informant identity (Turkle 1995). However, netnography seems perfectly suited to Mead's (1938) approach, in which the ultimate unit of analysis is not the person but the behavior or the act. I also draw insight from the work of the founder of "the linguistic turn" in philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1968), who might suggest that the posting of computer text is a social action (a communicative act or "language game"). If so, then every aspect of the "game" (the act, type, and content of the posting; the medium; and so on) is relevant observational data in itself, capable of being trustworthy. Using online data in this manner requires a radical shift from traditional ethnography, which observes people, to netnography, which observes and must recontextualize conversational acts. This shift is necessary because the characteristics of conversation in netnography are different than they are in traditional ethnography: They occur through computer mediation, they are publicly available, they are generated in written text form, and the identities of conversants are much more difficult to discern.

Generally speaking, links to fixed demographic markers can be useful for some marketing strategy purposes (e.g., targeting), and netnography is more limited than traditional ethnography in this regard. The netnographer must determine the importance of these markers in relation to the research question and to the authority that will be granted to findings. It is worth noting that direct misrepresentation is

discouraged in most online forums. Codes of etiquette (see Gunn 2000) and other social pressures are often in effect. Misrepresenting oneself as a member of a restricted group (e.g., women only, under 18 years of age) is an offense punished by flaming, ostracism, and banishment. However, triangulation of netnographic data with data collected using other methods, such as in interviews, focus groups, surveys, or traditional in-person ethnographies, may be useful if the researcher seeks to generalize to groups other than the populations studied. Generalizing the study beyond particular online groups may not be necessary. Yet careful triangulation and long-term immersion in the community can be useful to help marketing researchers distinguish hard-core, marginal extremists from a more typical group of consumers. It should be noted that, just as during in-person exchanges, extremists are derided. In the larger communities (with hundreds of active members) moderate views seem to prevail. Online communities present fairly explosive environments and, freed of many of the usual social restraints employed during in-person gatherings, hard-core extremists are often soundly condemned.

In summary, throughout netnographic data collection and analysis, marketing researchers must be conscious that they are analyzing the content of an online community's communicative acts rather than the complete set of observed acts of consumers in a particular community. This is a crucial difference between netnography and traditional ethnography. Stories of online misrepresentation are legion and important. Generalizations to markets or communities other than the one studied, online or offline, must have corroborating evidence. To be trustworthy, the conclusions of a netnography must reflect the limitations of the online medium and the technique.

*Research ethics.* One of the most important differences between traditional ethnography and netnography may be in issues of research ethics. Marketing researchers desiring to use netnography as a method are obliged to consider and follow ethical guidelines. These guidelines for ethical social science research in cyberspace have been the topic of recent debate. Ethical concerns about netnography turn on two nontrivial, contestable, and interrelated issues: (1) Are online forums to be considered a private or a public site? and (2) What constitutes "informed consent" in cyberspace? A clear consensus on these issues, and therefore on ethically appropriate procedures for netnography, has not emerged.

In a major departure from traditional face-to-face methods such as ethnography, focus groups, or personal interviews, netnography uses information that is not given specifically and in confidence to the marketing researcher. The consumers who originally created the data do not necessarily intend or welcome the data's use in research representations. Netnographers are professional "lurkers": The uniquely unobtrusive nature of the method is the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness. If marketing researchers undertaking netnography act in a manner found to be irresponsible and disrespectful by consumers, they may well damage the medium (by either suppressing outright or driving into secrecy previously open social interactions) and thereby "poisoning the research well" (Reid 1996). This is a real risk. White (1999, p. B1) reports how music promoters avoided identifying themselves when they acted as both online marketers and marketing researchers "trying to get a quick gauge on something, where you don't want anyone's guard to be up."

There is genuine debate about the public versus private issue. Speaking particularly about the electronic eavesdropping of observational ethnography, Rafaeli (quoted in Sudweeks and Rafaeli 1995) summarizes the consensus of a certain group of scholars who debated the private versus public issue by stating that informed consent was implicit in the act of posting a message to a public area. Given that certain precautions were taken to provide anonymity to informants, this group of scholars approved an ethical policy in which the informed consent of Internet posters was not required. King (1996), however, bases his analysis on the notion that online forums dissolve traditional distinctions between public and private places, making conventional guidelines of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent unclear. King (1996) therefore concludes that because consumers might be deluded about the quasi-public nature of their ostensibly private communications, gaining additional informed consent from them was the responsibility of researchers. Sharf (1999) echoes this heightened sensitivity to the ethics of even observational netnography.

The potential for netnography to do harm is a real risk. For example, if a marketing researcher were to publish sensitive information that was overheard in a chat room, this might lead to embarrassment or ostracism if an associated person's identity was discerned (see Hamman 1996). Several informants have requested that I not publish statements they have posted on public bulletin boards, even though I always guarantee their anonymity. I have always honored these requests. This evidence supports the contention that "there is a potential for psychological harm to the members of these [online community] groups, depending on the way results are reported" (King 1996, p. 119).

Researchers who have published cultural secrets; portrayed people and practices inaccurately; or treated customs, individuals, and beliefs disdainfully have tainted the history of ethnography. The same potential for harm exists for netnography. In a time of increasing public scrutiny of corporate actions and computer privacy issues, as well as institutional review board scrutiny in academia, netnographers would be wise to consider the chief ethical concerns apparent in netnography: privacy, confidentiality, appropriation of others' personal stories, and informed consent (Sharf 1999).

Therefore, I recommend four ethical research procedures for marketing researchers using netnography. Although they parallel practices in conventional ethnography, these first three procedures are not at all obvious to people who are used to conducting Web searches and Internet research. They are as follows: (1) The researcher should fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research; (2) the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to informants; and (3) the researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched. The fourth procedure is specific to the online medium: (4) The researcher should take a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue. This procedure requires the researcher to contact community members and obtain their permission (informed consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research. Permission must be obtained for using idiosyncratic stories as well (see Sharf 1999, pp. 253–55). Before using any online artifacts, such as newsletters, poetry, stories, or photographs, permission from the copyright holder must be

granted. Following these specially adapted research techniques will help ensure that ethical netnography is conducted that avoids poisoning the well for future researchers.

*Member checks.* A member check (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, p. 485; Hirschman 1986, p. 244; Lincoln and Guba 1985) is 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. Member checks prove particularly valuable for three reasons related to the dissimilarity of netnography from traditional ethnography. First, because they enable researchers to obtain and elicit additional, more specific insights into consumer meanings, they are particularly valuable for conducting an unobtrusive, observational netnography (i.e., member checks provide the opportunities for added development and error checking). Second, they help ameliorate some of the contentious ethical concerns described in the previous section, while still preserving the value of unobtrusive observation (because member checks are usually conducted after data collection and analysis has concluded). Third, and perhaps most important, member checks can help establish an ongoing information exchange between marketing researchers and consumer groups that is unprecedented in traditional qualitative research. Indeed, using the conduct of netnography as a forum for ongoing, widespread, bidirectional communication between organizations and their communities of customers could help realize some of the hidden potential in the paradigm of relationship marketing.

As distinct from face-to-face ethnography (in which member checks are burdensome and onerous and therefore are sometimes omitted) and focus groups and interviews (in which member checks are not usually employed), netnographic member checks are a generally simple and convenient matter. The low costs of computer-mediated communication enable the marketing researcher to easily provide any interested reader with some or all of the research text, by either posting it on a Web page or sending it as an e-mail attachment. The elicitation and collection of informant comments is also greatly simplified and expedited through e-mail. Because member checks, as well as the other elements of netnography, can generally be completed in a more timely manner than face-to-face market-oriented ethnography, they provide marketers the opportunity to detect and respond more quickly to the changing consumer tastes, meanings, and desires that underlie important marketing trends. Given these methodological considerations, I now proceed to a brief illustrative example of market research using netnography.

#### *ILLUSTRATION: ANALYSIS OF THE MEANINGS OF CONTEMPORARY COFFEE CONSUMPTION IN AN ONLINE COFFEE COMMUNITY*

##### *Applying Netnographic Methodology*

In the short section that follows, netnography is illustrated as a marketing research method. Netnography is used to explore and analyze some of the meanings and symbol systems that surround contemporary coffee consumption (in particular, those surrounding espresso and Starbucks) for the posters to an online community that is dedicated to coffee-related discussion. Understanding and tracking these meanings and symbol systems are of considerable practical importance. As many marketers are aware, there have been

tectonic shifts in the coffee market in the past decade. Major consumer packaged goods companies such as General Foods and Procter & Gamble were apparently caught unaware by the Seattle coffeehouse trend that came to be personified by the "Starbucks invasion" that overtook boutique coffee shops and subsequently encroached on supermarket aisles (see Pendergrast 1999; Schultz and Yang 1999). Starbucks simultaneously raised the consciousness of coffee connoisseurship, the demand for coffee shops, the sales of coffee-flavored ice cream and cold drinks, and the market price of a cup of coffee.

An understanding of coffee meanings can be gleaned from a netnography of a dedicated coffee group. As with the membership of many online market-oriented communities, the members of this coffee group can be characterized as devoted, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and innovative. In their enthusiasm, knowledge, and experimentation with new forms of coffee consumption, they can provide information similar to that from "lead users," the inventive consumers who are at the leading edge of significant new marketing trends (von Hippel 1986, 1988). Although some may be marginal or hard-core users, their creative ideas and insights should not be discounted as without value. By carefully evaluating their innovative ideas and by cross-validating the quality of information they provide about current consumption trends with other information sources, this study reaches conclusions that can inform decisions by members of the coffee market, such as consumer packaged goods companies, coffeehouse retailers, coffee mail-order companies (both online and offline), and advertisers working on coffee-related accounts. By carefully corroborating, interpreting, and critically evaluating this information, this research could generate insights to inform new product concepts, positioning strategies, advertising campaigns, distribution tactics, and other marketing strategies and practices. Understanding this online community's messages and its medium can also provide insight into the use of newsgroups and other online media for coffee-related marketing.

*Entrée in online coffee culture.* This netnography into online coffee culture began with an overview of the newsgroups that contained the term "coffee" and were available from my local server. These revealed three potential newsgroups, <alt.coffee>, <alt.food.coffee>, and <rec.food.drink.coffee>, as well as several others. I chose <alt.coffee> because it had by far the highest amount of traffic (approximately 75 messages per day) and therefore contained the most data. According to 1995 Arbitron data, <alt.coffee> is ranked 1042 out of all newsgroups, is carried by 40% of all service providers, and is read by 55,939 people worldwide (Reid 1995).<sup>2</sup> It contains a core of insiders who are frequently quoted and referenced by other community members, deferred to by existing and new members, and mentioned by members as important arbiters of coffee taste. Therefore, from an informal type of network analysis, these insiders seem to be usefully conceptualized as opinion leaders in the local context of this particular online community. The community also contains many minglers, who stay on for periods of six months to a year, and a large number of

<sup>2</sup>Given the growth of the Internet between 1995 and 2000 and the doubling of message postings on <alt.coffee> during that period, it is likely that as of 2000, the newsgroup had more than 100,000 readers worldwide.



tourists, who come and go with specific queries. Prior news-group surveys indicate that posters are mostly male and well educated, with an average age of 48 years. As part of ongoing research, I followed <alt.coffee> and related news-groups and downloaded noteworthy messages starting in February 1998. I read several hundred messages over the 33 months of netnographic research. In addition, the research was informed by searches of coffee-related Web pages, Web rings, and mailing lists; books about coffee; coffee consumption experimentation; and in-person product-related discussions with coffee consumers and connoisseurs. Limiting the investigation to 179 postings that I downloaded and printed kept the amount of data limited to a manageable level. The majority of the messages that I downloaded were posted between July and November 2000.

*Data collection.* The 179 postings were preclassified (before downloading) into topics that were either relevant or not relevant to the research topic of interest (contemporary coffee meanings). For example, threads (a thread is a set of interrelated bulletin board postings) such as “Coffee Poem” and “How to make a great cappuccino at home” were pursued. Threads such as “NY Chocolate Show” were not, because they were judged not to be relevant. Several message threads related to Postum, such as “Anyone tried or heard of this?” were explored and downloaded, which elucidated what constituted both good coffee and its antithesis. As the investigation narrowed onto discussion of Starbucks, the “Weird Starbucks Experience,” “Peets So Good,” and “Americans—your thoughts on Starbucks wanted” threads were downloaded. The importance of espresso to the community was also evident as the investigation narrowed. This topic was explored in “Woohoo, just got my Silvia/Rocky.” These threads were chosen for their rich content, descriptiveness, relevant topic matter, and conversational participation by a range of different community members. The range of conversational participation was important to avoid the research being misled or unduly influenced by a minority of unrepresentative and vocal extremists.

Using carefully chosen message threads in netnography is akin to “purposive sampling” in market-oriented ethnography (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Because findings are to be interpreted in terms of a particular sample, it is not necessary for the sample to be representative of other populations. However, there is the potential for anonymous self-promotion by manufacturers and retailers. Therefore, messages that were suspect in this manner (i.e., overly engaging in promotion or containing an e-mail address related to the company on which they were commenting) were excluded from the data set. In addition, and when it was possible to do so, apparently off-topic useless talk was coded and excluded from analysis because it did not pertain to the central topic of coffee consumption.

*Analysis and interpretation.* The coding of the postings involved both data analysis and data interpretation (Spiggle 1994, p. 492). Netnographic data in each categorized interaction were compared with the data from other events that were coded as belonging to the same category, and their similarities and differences were examined (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Spiggle 1994). Each category later formed a theme, abstract or grounded theory, or “metaobservation” (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Lincoln and Guba 1985; McCracken 1988). For this research, the volume of text was 198 double-

spaced 12-point font pages, representing 117 postings containing 65 distinct e-mail addresses and user names (likely related to the number of people posting messages). Disconfirming evidence was sought, both within the data set and in later searches of Web pages and the <alt.coffee> newsgroup, and resulted in several early themes being rejected. Concomitantly with analysis, the data were subjected to interpretation, which, as Spiggle (1994, pp. 497, 500) describes it, is “playful, creative, intuitive, subjective, particularistic, transformative, imaginative, and representative.”

*Ethics and member checks.* To ensure research ethics, I identified myself in postings to the community, told members about the observation, and provided my credentials. I sought permission to use direct quotations, and it was granted. To ensure a trustworthy interpretation (Lincoln and Guba 1985), I conducted member checks with nine online informants. Member check informants said they were “impressed” by the netnography and thought it was “perceptive” and even “fantastic.” They also had several suggestions. Member checks resulted in revisions to the depiction of basic coffee (including press pot and vacuum pot preferences), commodification, and religious devotion and the provision of some additional group characteristics.

*A Brief Netnography of Online Coffee Culture on the <alt.coffee> Usenet Newsgroup*

As Sherry (1995, p. 356) has noted, “Coffee is among the preeminent vessels of meaning in consumer culture” (see also Pendergrast 1999). This richness of meaning is evident in the vital and virtuosic exchanges that transpire through <alt.coffee>. Like the members of any thoroughgoing culture, the denizens of the <alt.coffee> newsgroup speak their own language. Their posted conversations are peppered with terms that are unfamiliar to the uninitiated: baristas and JavaJocks, cremas and roastmasters, tampers and superautomatics, livias and tiger flecks. It is the specialized language of the coffee lover, conveying many of the subtleties of coffee taste and preparation.

Understanding the language of consumer segments and its specific underlying social motivations is a key aspect to achieving the market orientation (Kohli and Jaworski 1990) that can successfully conceptualize new products, employ existing and new channels, and write potent advertising that meaningfully communicates to markets. Although a full translation of this newsgroup’s language is impossible in this article, I examine some important cultural themes contained within it. In this short netnography, I examine themes of distinction, consumption webs, commodification concerns, and religious devotion. I specify marketing research implications throughout and extend them in the conclusion.

*Distinction: decoding the language of motivation.* On <alt.coffee>, the specifics of coffee connoisseurship are repeatedly taught. One of the first things taught is that basic coffee, the type that most people enjoy in their offices and homes, is usually beneath contempt because it is “normally very badly prepared and stale.” Proper coffee, flavorful coffee must be prepared correctly. This means avoiding paper filters and drip coffee (and percolators) and instead using gold filters, cafetiere, press pots, or vacuum pots (in order of preference). Although espresso may not be the most frequently consumed form, it is the most discussed form of coffee on the newsgroup. Real coffee, precious coffee,

essential coffee (both literally and figuratively) is espresso, consumed without “cow juice” or sugar. Making good espresso is a complicated affair. It involves careful attendance to the water, the grind, the timing of the shot, knowledge of the machine, a clean portafilter (portable filter) and screen, the tamper, the blend, the ambient temperature, the age of the coffee, the degree of the roast, the air humidity, incoming water temperature, internal boiler temperature, and even such mystical elements as the mood of the barista [coffee server] and “good old-fashioned luck.”

These are not merely functional considerations but online incantations of status, upward social movement, and hedonism that are intended to manifest and demonstrate the “distinction” or “cultural capital” of upper-class tastes and abilities (Bourdieu 1984; see also Holt 1998). There is an elitist or classist “snob appeal” to coffee knowledge that motivates discerning tasting, as well as the reading of coffee-related books such as *Uncommon Grounds* (Pendergrast 1999) and authoritative guides such as the site of David Schomer (<http://www.lucidcafe.com/cafeforum/schomer.html>). As Levy (1981) convincingly demonstrates, there are strong links among discernment, social class, and the acculturated sense of taste. This acculturation of the complexities of taste and flavor appears to transpire online. For example, the flavor of good espresso is much discussed and described online (it is not too watery and not too burnt tasting but has a slight agreeable bitterness and a slight astringency).

Also, the group’s discursive actions enact a deep desire to go behind the scenes; to understand what it is that makes a particular type of coffee superior; and then to capture, reproduce, and by reproducing become a part of the productive consumption of the experience. This productive consumption is also a status marker. Home espresso brewing is a fairly expensive hobby (but not prohibitively so for the U.S. middle class), which is partially why it can serve as a distinctive marker. This need not only to consume but also to actively produce is a hallmark of deep devotion to a particular consumption orientation, such as is found in a range of subcultural, sports, music, and media fan experiences (see, e.g., Fiske 1989).

*Consumption webs: mapping the paths of desire.* The key to these descriptions is not merely their specifics (though these are equally important to consumers and the marketers that seek to serve them) but the amazing rarity that is conveyed within them, the scarcity evident in all the stressing over when to pull, when to tamp, how to time, which machine, which coffee bean. One member cautioned that only one of every five pulls is worth drinking, which makes educating the palate about good espresso a difficult task. As with wine production and tasting, production and discernment of espresso takes time and practice. Some coffeephiles claim that their taste bud training took months. One active <alt.coffee> poster stated that the training period lasted nine months. This coffeephile noted that the downside to educating his palate was that he became a slave to coffee and eventually spent huge amounts of money to keep himself from being subjected to more ordinary coffee (which had become unbearable to him). He also noted that there was no end to his involvement. Once acculturated, he kept finding new pieces of coffee equipment that he could not live without, a state of affairs he jokingly yet pointedly blamed on his fellow <alt.coffee> coffeephiles.

The marketing research implications of these postings lay in the way some coffeephiles describe their motivation to develop taste, which led them to spend large amounts of money on coffee equipment. When they are acculturated to the proper taste of espresso and its rarity, these consumers reject conventional coffee offerings (often giving them terrible, excretory names) and popular cafés (often emphasizing their robotic qualities) and are drawn into multiple investments to which there seem no end. The previous comments, in which a coffeephile ascribes his increasing investment to the influence of a fellow newsgroup member, suggest the power of the newsgroup to acculturate consumption practices. This acculturating force, which drives increasing investments in a new cultural interest, has been termed the “Diderot effect” (McCracken 1990). In the <alt.coffee> newsgroup, there is evidence for an acculturated transition from regular home-brewed coffee to basic press pots (such as the Bodum) to better press pots to vacuum pots. Another is from home brews to café-bought coffee to café-bought “fancier” drinks such as latté and cappuccino to store-bought espresso to homemade espresso, which requires a starter machine, then a better machine, a coffee bean grinder, then a coffee bean roaster, then a kitchen vent for the roaster, then better beans, and so on. This subtle inculcation of coffee tastes (on a trajectory culminating in a taste for espresso) is often mapped out in coffeephile communications, tracing a gustatory route through, for example, cappuccino, macchiato, and con panna to espresso.

In total, this set of united products can be interpreted as a “product constellation” (Solomon and Assael 1987) that is linked to the real or desired social class of these coffee drinkers. For marketing researchers, this product map might be thought of as a particular consumption web that increasingly draws a group of consumers into deeper and more profound levels of (sub)cultural involvement and enthusiasm, consumption, and investment. Understanding the configuration of these particular consumption webs would provide coffee-related manufacturers and retailers with ideas for new product and service offerings and bundling (e.g., bundling together brands of products that are perceived as associated with other brands, bundling together kitchen venting systems with roasters, bundling features on espresso machines to produce consumer-related forms of coffee).

*Commodified brands: brand image and community concerns.* Another important cultural code links good coffee to passion, artistry, and authenticity as a fully realized human being. The discussions that reveal this code centered on the nature of the barista, or coffee server. The online coffeephiles proclaim that “the product (be it food or coffee)” is always “an expression of the maker’s personality” because it is “an art after all” (Vincent,<sup>3</sup> posted on <alt.coffee> August 6, 2000), that “barista” implies “an artisan . . . like a seasoned sommelier or vintner” (Angelo, posted on <alt.coffee> August 9, 2000). Several posters claim that they would not visit a café whose baristas were not coffee lovers (and several others disagreed). An existential dimension is added by one of the original posters, in which he rejects the term “artisan” but says that being an authentic barista “has to do with the way you live your life.” Coffee becomes, to this culture member, a metaphor for life, in which either life is mere rule

<sup>3</sup>Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect informant confidentiality.



following “or you really experience what life is all about” (Vincent, posted on <alt.coffee> August 9, 2000). The mark of authenticity is baristas who “drink/live coffee” just as do the denizens of <alt.coffee>. It is passion that matters: “Coffee is the passion of a barista and a lifelong profession” (Peter, posted on <alt.coffee> August 13, 2000). This emphasis is also present in an online debate among Starbucks employees. The more passionate coffee drinker (former employee) accused the other (current employee):

Coffee is just another product for you too. You could just as well be selling those turnip twaddlers or flame retardant condoms, but as long as you are having fun and paying your bills, that is all that matters to you, right? I am afraid that it is not quite that simple for many of us. We take our coffee very seriously, and to have it demeaned in such a manner is a slap in the face. Coffee is much more than a tool. It is passion, it is intrigue, mystery, seduction, fear, betrayal, love, hate, and any other core human emotion that you can think of, all wrapped into one little bean. (Peter, posted on <alt.coffee> August 14, 2000)

Because Peter’s rich and revealing comments were applauded and referenced by many different members of the online community, they seem to cut to the core of some important (and shared) impressions of Starbucks among <alt.coffee> members. Coffee is emotional, human, deeply and personally relevant—and not to be commodified (Kopytoff 1986) or treated as “just another product.” This concern is reflected in two negative newsgroup nicknames for Starbucks: As an expensive and faceless corporate entity, it is “\*\$”; as a killer of mom-and-pop local stores, it is “corporate coffee.” Presenting important cultural clues to the positioning of any new coffee marketer that seeks to compete with the Starbucks brand, the discussion of Starbucks turned into a more general discussion of the perils of commercialization and cultural commodification. The resentment over the commodification of coffee connoisseurship leads to dialectics of authenticity and genuineness:

What I am coming to in my own life and consumer behavior is that I want to support and savor the true specialty items while I can. I’d rather eat Barry’s fudge ... than Godiva “faux specialty” chocolates. And I’d rather drink the local café’s coffee rather than Starbucks’s because, well, those tiny, passionate companies are more precious than Starbucks.... Any corporation with food chemists can make Starbucks’s product, IMO [in my opinion]. Only a passionate, driven romantic would keep making top-notch specialty coffee day in and day out. Lose Starbucks and another clone clicks into that economic eco-niche. Lose a lover or a hero and you might wait a long time until another comes along. (Fred, posted on <alt.coffee> November 19, 2000)

Fred’s dialectic transcends functional characteristics such as coffee flavor. Its overriding theme is that vendors or manufacturers should demonstrate a genuine passion for the product equal to, or close to, that of its connoisseur consumers. This sentiment resists, in some sense, the commodification of labor in which people can be mechanistically trained to produce items without enjoying them as consumers. It is a postmodern longing to return to productive consumption (Firat and Dhalokia 1998). Fred’s dialectic of commodification reflects a search for authenticity, ties to the local, caring by producers,

craftsmanship, and artistry. In the same posting, Fred explains that to support Starbucks is not to support local merchants such as Tom, a coffee “maven” who is obsessed with “the Zen of the cup” (a spiritual–religious metaphor connoting devotion and authenticity). To support local cafés is a statement not only about coffee but about human values and the world. As Fred states, it helps maintain “a world of beauty and passion.”

*Religious devotion: uncovering meaningful metaphors.* This utopian “world of beauty and passion” is evident in the wonderfully detailed accounts of coffee preparation and consumption provided in the newsgroups, which serve as sources of espresso education, expressionism, and exhibitionism. Members draw one another in with dramatic flair and literary devices that playfully hint at the joyful mindset of the coffee connoisseur and, tongue-in-cheek, employ sacred metaphors. Describing himself in the third person, Jerry lovingly details (in several pages of text) his exact experiences with his new coffemaker:

He hit the brew switch [on his new Livia 90 cappuccino/espresso maker].... At first, nothing. Then..., beautiful reddish-brown crema ... the “tiger flecks” he had heard so much about but rarely had seen flowed forth and fell just short of two ounces in 25 seconds. He stood just admiring the crema when suddenly a voice called to him, “The milk! The Milk!” (Jerry, posted on <alt.coffee> November 2, 2000)

As with Fred’s “passion,” his David and Goliath–story “hero,” and his “world of beauty,” the language Jerry uses here is romantic, idealistic, and biblical. The crema (oil from the coffee beans) is “beautiful,” and it “flowed forth” much like a river of milk and honey might do for Old Testament Israelites. Jerry did not simply remember to steam the milk but portrayed it as “a voice” that “called [un]to him,” as if he were a biblical prophet. The drama and religion may be parodic, but they are repeatedly present and meaningful as a local cultural code, indicating that this is not merely the meandering of extremists. For example, other postings replicate the dramatic and religious metaphor, calling the lack of passion by a “Starbucks jock” “Sacrilege!” and the addition of sugar to espresso the mark of a person who “has no soul.”

The interpretive coup de grâce may be in the term that this community of coffeeophiles uses for the elusive, religious experience, the exhaustive apotheosis of espresso moments, the holy grail of the coffee dream quest. It is called a “god shot.” It represents the sublime moment of coffee productive consumption, an absolutely perfect, indefinable moment of glory, one that cannot be captured, reproduced, or summoned at will. A god-shot is a supernatural event. It is a moment when human being and nature are reunited in a perfect convergence of elements (water, fire, air, and earth/grounds), resulting in a perfectly pleasurable occurrence. This interpretation does not suggest that coffee consumption is actually a religion for these coffeeophiles. But for them it has religious aspects of search, passion, and transcendence (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) and deeply meaningful ties to identity (Fiske 1989). As comments to Jerry’s postings indicate, these metaphors are highly motivational and persuasive and thus are of interest to marketing researchers.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Deriving from naturally occurring, communal, cross-consumer interaction that is not found in focus groups or personal interviews, netnography reveals interesting consumer insights, impressions, linguistic conventions, motivations, consumption web linkages, and symbols. It provides feedback on brands and products that has not been elicited in any way by marketers, eliminating the researcher-induced demand effects of these methods and of traditional ethnographic inquiry and interview. The method achieves all this in a manner that is far more unobtrusive, convenient, and accessible than traditional ethnography. It is also far more economical.

As the consumer verbatims and descriptions provided previously may attest, online consumers tend to be knowledgeable and educated and provide interesting consumption insights. Because message posters are in some respect self-selected for their eloquence, the data they provide can be extraordinarily rich. Online posters appear to spend large amounts of time and money on their focal consumption activity. By carefully evaluating their innovative ideas, their knowledge base, and their consumer insights, marketing researchers can obtain useful information similar to that obtained from lead users (von Hippel 1986, 1988). Ideas for innovative trends in particular realms of consumption such as novel product concepts may thus be initiated by investigations that begin with netnography. However, careful consideration and cross-validation of the online data will be critical to the researcher's avoiding being misled by overly zealous or vocal community members. Similarly, cross-validation and a careful categorical analysis will be required for an understanding of the relationship of different types of online community members to typical online and offline consumers.

#### *Implications of <alt.coffee> Netnography*

Given the familiar diffusion of innovations model, it can easily be argued that today's devoted or extreme consumer's perspective can yield important insights into the more mainstream consumer behavior of tomorrow (von Hippel 1988). The implications of this marketing research for wise coffee marketers are thus considerable. It may have appeared, in the wake of Starbucks, that marketers had been one-upped by the Seattle coffeehouse craze and had missed the opportunity to raise the market to its new upscale level. Yet if the market intelligence of the <alt.coffee> group is correct, coffee marketers have barely even begun to plumb the depths of taste, status, and snob appeal that are waiting to be explored by discriminating coffee consumers who are in need of market education.

Experimental and innovative online coffee consumers offer a range of discoveries that, like a lead user analysis, inform the understanding of coffee marketing trends. Not only does <alt.coffee> offer the enticing consumption webs and socialization pressures that can turn decaffeinated drinkers into home-roasting, home-brewing, espresso savors, willing to throw out four shots of expensive brew in search of the all-elusive but sublimely satisfying "god shot," but it also suggests that there is far more to coffee consumption than the in-person social, communal, and socially responsible aspects that have been so successfully exploited

by Starbucks. New brands and blends of beans, new means of delivering the freshest of fresh beans (online and offline), new means of roasting, new bean roasting services, new espresso and cappuccino machines, new forms of education and instruction, new coffee tasting clubs, and new types of cafés are premium opportunities that await further evaluation and exploration by opportunistic new product developers and market educators.

From the practical standpoint of professional marketing researchers, identifying appropriate online communities for particular marketing research clients is more art than science. As this <alt.coffee> netnography demonstrates, the information present in a particular newsgroup is likely to be of more value to certain types of industry players. In <alt.coffee>, the information is particularly valuable to online and offline marketers of high-end espresso makers, roasters, grinders, cafés, and roasted and unroasted coffee beans and others that sell coffee connoisseurship-related goods.

However, the information provided in the netnography about coffee's cultural cachet (relating it to social distinction, artisanship, craftsmanship, personal involvement, passion, authenticity, humanity, and religious devotion) might be useful in articulating a range of positioning and branding strategies with wider appeal. For example, newsgroup participants' critique of Starbucks's brand meaning (regarded as mechanistic, dispassionate, oppressive, overly large, and lacking humanity or a human touch) might be perceived as feedback to Starbucks and an opportunity for Starbucks's competitors. If the Starbucks brand is becoming passé, a mere symbol ("\*\$") of overroasting, a good place to read and hang out but not to drink coffee, then the next generation of coffee brands to tap into the discriminating coffee ethos will likely thrive by positioning on the opposite end of these dimensions: human, passionate, roasted right, free, alive, locally involved, existentially complete. These cultural meanings will draw on rich associations to art and artisanship, craftsmanship and connoisseurship—perhaps even religion and spirituality—and do it in a manner that is authentic and genuine. Coffee companies with a true market orientation will find opportunities in this netnographic data and their own coffee consumer communion not simply for a new appearance or façade but for a depth of marketplace involvement and the understanding of a genuine, passionate coffee lover.

#### *Conclusion*

Online communities devoted to consumption-related topics are an increasingly important source of data for marketing research. These groups may be construed as individual market segments that are of interest in their own right and may be of noteworthy size. As purchase and consumption decisions are discussed and debated in online communities, it is important that marketing researchers have rigorous and ethical methodological procedures to collect and interpret this data in this novel and challenging context. As the illustration demonstrates, netnography can be a useful, flexible, ethically sensitive, and unobtrusive method adapted to the purpose of studying the language, motivations, consumption linkages, and symbols of consumption-oriented online communities.

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