



Marketing Netnography: Prom/ot(ulgat)ing a New Research Method

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Abstract

This paper builds upon a core metaphor of scientific methodological diffusion as a specialized form of the marketing of ideas. Using as an illustrative the development and spread of netnography, online ethnography of social media data, this paper explores the nature of the creation, legitimation, adoption, and spread of a new scientific method. Viewing method diffusion as a type of marketing suggests a range of implications. Ideas about the method can be viewed, treated, and managed as a type of 'brand'. The method is not created in a vacuum but, like a marketed new product, is engineered to satisfy a particular scientific or investigative need, and its success depends on how well it satisfies that need. A particular 'research-oriented segment' can be investigated, reached, and deliberately targeted. In this article, I explore how institutional waves of academic, geographic, and pragmatic target research audiences helped to reinforce the adoption of a new scientific approach. The method can be positioned intentionally in a particular methodological category, and as superior to other methods. Once the strategy for marketing the method is intact, the tactics for its spread can be introduced. The ideas for the method and methodology can be brought to their audience in a particular form, with particular attributes, through certain distribution or publication channels, promoted through various means, and offered through for a 'price' that encapsulates the difficulty of adopting it. The article explores these ideas about the promulgation of a new method using the development of netnography as an extended case study example.

Keywords: Adoption, diffusion of innovations, ethnography, marketing, methods, methodology, netnography, social constructionism, social sciences

Introduction

Stretching back to the work of Robert Merton in the 1940s, and reaching full flower with the publication of Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the sociology of science has a history stretching back over seven decades (see McInnis and Folkes 2010). One of the most interesting aspects of Kuhn's model was his notion that periods of revolutionary science interrupt relatively acquiescent conceptual periods of normal science. Rather remarkably, these revolutionary periods or 'paradigm shifts' are often based upon promise rather than actuality (see Agar's (2012) related notions of conceptual innovation). New scientific paradigms, Kuhn asserted, are well-orchestrated productions of contagious social enthusiasm.

In 1983, two prominent scientists were inspired by Kuhn's work, and the work of other important sociologists and philosophers of science, such as Paul Feyerabend. Working in the applied behavioral sciences field, they found 'somewhat naïve conceptions' informing 'the typical beliefs about how scientists do scientific work and how scientific progress is achieved' which are 'inconsistent with current views about such issues in the

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disciplines of philosophy, sociology, and history of science' (Peter and Olson 1983: 111). They presented a new, more useful, and more actionable conception of science as a special case of marketing – the marketing of ideas. Although Peter and Olson (1983) were referring to the marketing of scientific theories as ideas, this article builds upon this background in the sociology of science to apply these insights to the marketing of scientific research methods.

In the original outline for the session of the Oxford 2010 NCRM workshop titled 'The Processes of Methodological Innovation: Successful Development and Diffusion' from whence this article sprang, the organizers asked the participants to talk about how a new scientific method was 'promulgated'. Promulgate rings with high cultural capital overtones, drawing from the worlds of government, politics and diplomacy. It refers to the putting into effect of something, usually a law or a formal decree, and usually by means of a formal proclamation. To promulgate is thus to make an official announcement or a sort of regal declaration. In terms of science as methodology, it fits squarely in the 'ivory tower' model of academia – the pronouncement from rarefied heights, the announcement of the informed intelligentsia who have discovered a wondrous new Truth. Further, it might be argued that this ivory tower view fits with the so-called positivist or empiricist view of science as the objective means for discovering the true nature of reality, which is pronounced in quasi-religious, 'Puritanical', universal laws that are logical and which come closer and closer to absolute truth (see Merton 1973).

However, if we examine the likely etymology of promulgation, we find that its origins are probably from the Latin *prōmulgāre* to bring to public knowledge, which is very probably related to *provulgāre*, the word for publicizing. That word, *provulgāre*, relates to *vulgāre*, the act of making common, from *vulgus* the common people, a meaning enshrined in the derogatory term *vulgar*, which literally simply means of the common people. So from the proclamation from regal intellects carrying on their precious ivory tower-enshrined scientific work on high, we now have methodology that must relate to the "vulgar" common people, a method that must, in some sense, become common. This view of science fits much more comfortably with Kuhn, Feyerabend, and others' more relativistic or social constructionist view of science as a social and institutional process that creates, legitimizes, and diffuses theories and techniques.

It is this struggle between the proclamation of a methodological innovation and the adaptation and handing off of that innovation to the people that this article will explore and begin, given length restrictions, to develop. The article seeks initially to uncover in practice just how close the lofty ideas of promulgation are to the crasser and more basely democratic workings of what contemporary marketing practitioners would instantly recognize as a type of promotion, an adaptation and bringing to the common people of a particular method and methodology. In other words, the latter interpretation of the word promulgation fits perfectly with the idea of spreading a new scientific method, and its methodology, as the marketing of a social practice. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) teach us, the key to deriving insight from the use of conceptual metaphors such as 'methods of scientific method diffusion are like professional marketing techniques' is to seek to systematically explore exactly how the two elements of the metaphor are related and not related. Applying the world of marketing to the promotion of a scientific method implies many things about their similarities and dissimilarities.

First, it suggests that the new, or constructed as new, method – and the scholar – can be treated to some extent as a 'brand' that might be managed. Second, it implies that the method was created to satisfy a particular scientific 'market' need, and that its success was to some extent dependent upon how well and how completely it satisfied that need. Third, it indicates that the method was created and distributed to a particular group of scientists and scholars who have that need more than others, thus a particular 'research-oriented segment' that could be reached and targeted. Fourth, it tells us that the method could be branded by intentionally directing the targeted scholarly segment to consider it as belonging to a particular

methodological category, and to be superior to other methods in certain relevant and important respects. Finally, such a view indicates that a method could be intentionally brought to its audience in a particular form, with a particular orientation, for a certain 'price', through certain distribution or publication channels, and promoted through various means. The remainder of this article explores these ideas about the promulgation of a new method using the development of netnography as an extended case study example.

Netnography for Consistency: Meeting a New Scientific 'Market' Need

Netnography can be defined as a specialized form of ethnographic research that has been adapted to the unique contingencies of various types of computer-mediated social interaction. Developed in 1995 in response to rapid changes in online social interaction (see also Baym 1995; Jenkins 1995; Turkle 1995), the novelty of the approach lies in the view that the online world is a social and cultural world, and that scientists can benefit from understanding online interactions using a cultural frame of reference (Kozinets 1996; 1997; 1998). However, it also recognizes that these social worlds are so different in their manifestation that they require specific new approaches to data collection and research engagement, and that, as a consequence, having a common understanding and a common set of standards for such online ethnographic, or netnographic, studies will confer stability, consistency, and legitimacy (Kozinets 2010b). Netnography was not intended as a new brand, but as a distinct set of procedures intended to provide some reliability and confer some consistency on a new field of study.

How is netnography different from other research methods? Netnography differs from methods such as focus groups, surveys, interviews, data mining, and content mining in that it is naturalistic, immersive, contextually-driven, and observational as well as participative; these are also characteristics of ethnography (Fetterman 2009). To distinguish netnography from embodied face-to-face ethnography, Kozinets (2010b) identifies four critical differences between online and face-to-face cultural and social interactions. First the nature of the social and cultural interaction is altered – both constrained and liberated – by the specific nature and rules of the technological medium in which it is carried. Netnographies must work with technocultural artifacts in a way that ethnographies do not. Next, the interaction can be optimally anonymous or pseudonymous and even 'real' identities can be suspect. This has implications for the conduct of ethical and effective research, as well as for data collection and analysis. Third is the wide accessibility of many of the relevant forums of social interaction. This accessibility also alters the research approach and often radically transforms the data collection process from one of relative scarcity and difficulty to one of abundance. Finally, nothing in the physical world compares to the automatic archiving of conversations and data that we see in online social worlds, and this facet also transforms data collection and analysis. These differences in the nature of the culture, the nature of the communications, and the nature of the researcher interaction complicated and rendered less relevant prior elements of the ethnographic approach, such as making entrée, collecting data, analyzing data, ensuring a trustworthy interpretation, and following ethical research standards. Netnography offered researchers a new standard approach for working within this new cultural setting, a setting which, as Giglietto and Rossi (2012) and Das (2012) note, is constantly evolving and changing the approaches available to social scientific researchers.

Branding and Segmentation

In recognition of the fact that there was little methodological guidance for other scholars, the term 'netnography' was developed to describe this particular new approach to ethnography online (Kozinets 1996). Netnography is a portmanteau, a blending of two or more words into a distinctly new word. Netnography originally came from Internet, another portmanteau for International network, and ethnography, a new word, coined by anthropologists, meaning writing about culture, or the written product of a study of culture.

The approach was first presented to a group of cultural consumer research academics in Tuscon, Arizona in October of 1996, at the 'Association for Consumer Research' conference. As Peter and Olson (1983: 112) aver, 'Over its life cycle a theory may undergo a number of modifications in response to a variety of potential marketing problems'. However, rather than facing 'Customer complaints regarding measurement difficulties or lack of conceptual clarity, and competitive theory products marketed by other scientists' (ibid) as 'problems' netnography responded to so-called consumer demand by developing and expanding 'production' as in the process of test marketing. In test marketing, an idea is tested among a relevant representative group of the target population, then developed and altered based on the specific feedback received. The method grew based on responses and suggestions that it satisfied a genuine need for online ethnographic methods. In 1997, a new working paper was devoted exclusively to the method, entitled 'On Netnography' (Kozinets 1998). In addition, another application of a new study, this one of boycotting consumer activists and their online communal utterances and acts, was presented and published in full in conference proceedings (Kozinets and Handelman 1998). This early activity, resulting in three publications in the same field, using the same term, and all describing the method and the need for it (Kozinets 1997; 1998; Kozinets and Handelman 1998), may have helped to spread awareness, in a way analogous to the presence of a billboard or a radio advertisement might promote the presence of a new scented soap powder.

Peter and Olson (1983: 116) write about the different markets of scientists who receive scientific ideas, and suggest a tripartite division into doctoral students, pre-tenure scholars, and post-tenure scholars. This article will suggest some alternative, yet not contradictory, means of segmentation. First is segmentation by academic field. Second would be segmentation by type of research application, be it academic or applied in orientation. Third is segmentation by geography. Because netnography's field of origin is the field of consumer research, its initial work on netnography was targeted at consumer researchers. More specifically, it was targeted at cultural consumer researchers who were already using so-called 'qualitative' techniques such as ethnography and in-depth, or 'phenomenological' interviews (see Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989, Wild 2012).

This strategy of targeting was a relatively natural one, given that marketing and consumer research are specialized, smaller, rather close-knit communities, but it also may have assisted in the adoption of the scientific method or approach. In their review of the academic impact of three methodological innovations, Bengry-Howell et al. (2011: 11) found that 'citations of netnography have mostly occurred within the disciplinary fields of marketing (47%), management (17%) and business (12%). If these are treated as related disciplines, citations in this area account for 76% of netnography's overall citations'. However, the fact that 53% of the citations came from fields outside of marketing is significant. Marketing and consumer research fields are situated within business schools, and this type of concentration of interest and citation may have acted as hospitable climates and incubators for the method to diffuse to related academic areas in management and business.

Targeting top-tier publications in one field appears to have helped establish a core constituency, or 'beachhead' through which netnography could clearly be pointed at as a credible and legitimate way to do research. This is, in some sense, parallel to the technology adoption process modeled in classic diffusion models derived from Everett Rogers' insights. The 'beachhead' strategy is a useful conception suggested and developed by Geoffrey Moore (1991). Like a spreading network of activation, netnography first gained legitimacy in the interpenetrating fields of consumer research and marketing scholarship featuring the work of academics working worldwide in university business and management schools. From conference presentations, it moved to so-called 'top-tier publications' that allegedly possess the highest and most rigorous methodological standards. It became accepted by those scientific journals as an ostensibly 'legitimate' method,

having survived the double-blind peer review process with the most demanding reviewers and editors. Established and credentialed in the hierarchical hegemony of peer-reviewed scientific publications, netnography then spread to the lower-tier and specialty journals of other fields of inquiry. From there, in a relatively short amount of time, the method seems to have spread to other, much larger fields such as sociology and economics. Although these other citations only account for 23% of netnography's citations up until 2011, the potential spread within these massive fields is considerable.

More recently, netnography has been used in consumer research textbooks used at the undergraduate and graduate levels (see Avery et al 2010). The most recent attempt to target a larger potential audience of methodological adopters, to broaden the impact and underpin the credibility of the approach was the writing of a Sage Research Methods book about netnography, intended for use by graduate and doctoral students, and academic research peers (see Kozinets 2010b).

The Second and Third Waves

When we take a method from the specialized and somewhat inward-looking academic arena and attempt to promote it in areas that are more outward looking, then boundary spanning and translation activities are in order. In order to adapt netnography from an academic audience to the second and third waves of practical/industrial and geographically-divergent audiences, it was necessary to enhance awareness of the method and to simplify it. This effort dovetails and builds upon the academic credibility gained through the legitimation of the netnographic through conference presentations and academic journal publications. In addition, it involved publications that had more of an applied, practitioner element, such as the *Journal of Advertising Research* (see Kozinets 2006). The relevant analogy would be to move from publishing in a biochemistry journal to a pharmaceutical journal, or a psychological theory journal to one catering more to the issues faced by clinical psychologists.

From the year 2000 to the present, there have been multiple presentations made to various practitioner-oriented gatherings and conferences, such as the *Advertising Research Foundation*, the *Marketing Science Institute*, the *National Association of Broadcasters*, the *Marketing Research and Intelligence Association* as well as in related venues such as industry webinars. In order to do this work, and to target a different segment with the method, the method was translated into terms and practices that rendered lucid its guiding principles while minimizing the unfortunate obfuscation that sometimes can appear in academic writing and instruction. This has meant devising diagrams that show, for instance, how to conduct a netnography in five easy steps, or illustrations that show the fundamental principles of ethnography and then demonstrate how netnography is a rather straightforward adaptation or extension of them to the contingencies of the computer-mediated communication environment.

Another major effort has sought to spread the word and influence of netnography to an even more general audience. In 2007, a blog, Brandthroposophy, was established at www.kozinets.net. That blog often covered topics related to technology, social media, and social media marketing research. Ideas and notions about netnography were often shared. One major set of postings presented the entire progression of the Kozinets (2002) *Journal of Marketing Research* article, including all of the submissions, reviews, and revisions, so that interested readers could not only learn the 'behind-the-scenes' story of the development and progression of this foundational netnographic method article, but also could learn about the practices of academic publishing.

The next, overlapping wave of strategy to diffuse the approach of netnography is the notion of having the method be present through a variety of forms of partnership and application. This operation is a way to formally share interests and objectives regarding the success of the method with other, institutional, players.

One of the key tests of a marketing research method is whether it is actually useful to marketers in their daily practices. However practitioners may not be able to judge futuristic or advanced methods, and may not be in a position to take risks on new methods and techniques.

Peter and Olson (1983: 121) suggest that theories can be considered to be useful rather than being true and that this view of usefulness rather than truth may be a more meaningful way of judging the applicability of some theories and scientific ideas such as methodological proscriptions. This view of scientific adoption maps rather effortlessly upon the adoption of new scientific methods. 'Usefulness can be judged in terms of how effectively a theory enables the user to 'get along' in the world or accomplish some specific task. For example, if application of a marketing theory leads to an increase in long run profits for a firm, then it may be inferred that the theory was a good one [not necessarily a true one]; that is, it was useful in that situation and context, given that objective' (Peter and Olson 1983: 121). Similarly, if a technique provides a type of specific 'screwdriver' and many scholars are facing the need to turn particular screws of a particular formation that this screwdriver fits, then the method will be adopted because it is useful in solving that particular set of problems. Netnography is a useful 'screwdriver', then, when the 'screw' is cultural data, rich in meaning, that appears through a technologically mediated forum such as the web or the Internet.

Beginning in 2000 and continuing to the present day, netnography has been tested and adapted with a variety of real-world business problems. One form of application of netnography takes the form of working with organizations such as for-profit and non-profits in a number of practical marketing research consulting assignments. Netnography has also been used in consulting and research work with a variety of different companies in the finance, entertainment, pharmaceutical, consumer packaged goods, retail, and technology industries, as well as with industry associations, SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and non-profits (see for example Kozinets 2010a). These experiences have led to some adaptations and refinements of the method. The method has also led to corporate partnerships with marketing research companies like Hyve in Munich, Germany, Folks-Netnografica in Sao Brazil, Brazil, and NetBase in Silicon Valley, California.

Impact and Conclusions

Given these efforts, what has the uptake or adoption and use of the method of netnography been? Bengry-Howell et al (2011) do a very thorough job of assessing netnography's academic impact to date and thus of providing some evidence of the relative impact of these 'marketing' style methods. That research study found that since the early publications on netnography there has been a steady increase in citations referring to the method, with the majority of citations located broadly within the field of management and business studies. They found some evidence of uptake or interest in netnography from wider social science disciplines but declared this to be 'relatively limited' (Bengry-Howell et al 2011: 13). They also found that 'many of the citations are from authors from North America where Kozinets is based. However, there are citations from authors in a wide range of other countries; there are a high number of citations by authors in Europe, particularly the UK. There are also some citations from Australasia and Hong Kong. This certainly indicates some global spread of the approach, although mostly within the specific disciplines from which it originated' (Bengry-Howell et al 2011: 13-14).

Bengry-Howell et al. (2011: 13-14) sought to identify and study the adoption of relatively new research methods that had also had a chance to diffuse over a decade or more. They studied three cases, Kellett's Child-led research, Gauntlett's creative research methods, and Kozinets' netnography. According to their measures, whose rigours they describe in some detail, netnography was by far the most-cited method, with 138 vetted academic citations, more than the other two methods combined. In addition, consider that the foundational Kozinets (2002) article possessed at the time of writing this article 788 citations on Google

Scholar and was among the top-cited and top downloaded articles of the top-tier *Journal of Marketing Research*. The Sage netnography book has also enjoyed reasonable sales, attaining the modest best-seller status of academic publications and continuing to gather some adoption in academic graduate and Ph.D. courses.

In general, the idea that the promotion and promulgation of a scientific method can be likened to the marketing of an idea or practice has some merits and some very significant drawbacks. But can we really compare the marketing of a method to the marketing of a fizzy drink or a laundry detergent? In some ways yes, and in some ways, definitely not. First, methods are not mass productions. They are highly technical and highly specific constructions. Their audiences tend to be highly educated and thus to be persuaded by more rational rather than emotional arguments. The price that is charged is also in some ways much higher for a method than for soap powder. Scholars are investing their most precious resource: their time, energy, intellectual capital and even reputations when they adopt a new method. Channels of distribution for research ideas are more narrow. There are no large purveyors of methods, although journals and book publishers do play a role somewhat analogous to a warehousing or inventorying of methodological knowledge. Even more important, advertising is more limited. Without large individual players investing capital to reach large numbers of people and use professional techniques to persuade them to adopt a particular research method, methodological adoption does not resemble mass communications about consumer packaged goods and electronic brands. Advertising and promotions take various different forms.

This marketing of methodologies metaphorical insight has a number of intriguing implications, only a few of which have been explored in this article. For starters, marketing a research method infers that scientists understand their job as scientific pioneers not only in pedagogical, but also in promotional terms. In its essence, this means that constructing methods to fulfill specific needs is the foundation of methodological work, but it is certainly not the whole job. The promotional element is critical, difficult, and urgent. Institutionalizing the method through several waves of marketing promotion to different targets—the academic, the pedagogical, and the practitioner, as in this article’s illustration of netnography—is one frame for seeing how we might achieve this end of garnering methodical adoption among overlapping and yet distinct groupings of potential research supporters.

A marketing orientation to methodological diffusion means that we must position our new methods as offerings in a competitive field of ideas, and compete intentionally, strategically, and deliberately against those other ideas. We must see ourselves operating in a particular field or sub-field with similarities to other methods in that area in order to build a beachhead of support. We must also be able to clearly conceptualize and communicate the clear differences between our methodological offering and the offers that compete with it – as we saw in this article with netnography’s differentiation along the four A aspects of adaptation, anonymity, accessibility, and archiving. This difference must be relevant to our target audience, as it was for netnography’s ability to work with online community data as interaction, and analysis of it with respect to its cultural elements.

Since the time of Philip Kotler, marketers have codified their practice as the ‘four Ps’ of product, place (or channel), promotion, and price. The likening of science to marketing by Peter and Olson (1983: 113) inferred that scientific ideas could be likened to products, with sets of attributes such as their topics, pedigrees, field of origin, jargon, consistency, and empirical evidence. Ideas for theories of method can be distributed through channels such as conferences, proceedings, journals, chapters, and books. Now, of course, theories and techniques can also be distributed through web-pages, blogs, webinars, podcasts, videos, and social media postings, as well as through online journals (ibid 114). Promotional techniques include all of these channels, plus awards, publicity, and personal selling such as salesmanship (ibid 114-115).

Seeing methods as brands that must be carefully managed and communities of researchers as markets that should be clearly targeted might be seen by some as an insult to the institution of academia and science. These long-standing institutional divisions between science as ‘pursuit of knowledge’ and business as ‘pursuit of profit’ may be considered parallel to the false distinctions between low and high culture, or the elite/intelligentsia and the proletariat/people. There is nothing inherently insulting about being intentional and strategic in scientific pursuits. In fact, there may be a certain appeal to democratizing science and scientific results that is certainly not lost to postmodern anthropologists, action and participatory researchers, and others who seek to use their positions as researchers to effect meaningful and impactful change. If marketers and other business people are trained to make efficient and effective decisions about their choices and deployment of resources, including their own time, why would social and other scientists not decide to study their most effective promotional methods, and follow suit?

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Biography

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