



REGULAR PAPER

More than a solo method: Netnography's capacity to enhance offline research methods

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Abstract

As the use of the Internet has become ubiquitous and pervasive in people's work and day-to-day life, netnography has been increasingly adopted to study online communities and activities in a range of social science disciplines, including Geography. The literature has identified that netnography is an effective research method in its own right. This paper aims to contribute to the literature on netnography by revealing novel possibilities that emerge when netnography is combined with offline research methods. It finds that a more active and participatory approach to netnography can significantly facilitate and smooth offline research methods such as interviews and observations in two major ways. First, it increases social and cognitive proximity between researchers and their participants. Second, it enables the spatial and temporal extension of researchers' fieldwork.

KEYWORDS

China, ethnography, multi methodology, netnography, virtual space

1 | INTRODUCTION

Contemporary life is increasingly characterised by the ubiquity and pervasiveness of computer-driven technologies, such as the Internet, in people's work and day-to-day activities. Elwell argued that "ubiquitous computing signals a fusion of the digital and the analogue in everyday experience whereby it becomes impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends as the two are seamlessly integrated" (2014, p. 235). The wide adoption of digital technologies and tools has profoundly affected phenomena that are of great interest to geographers. According to Ash et al. (2018), the discipline of Geography is currently experiencing a "digital turn" as the digital becomes both the object and the subject of geographic research. Kinsley (2013) suggested that the significant amount of information that exists online is a growing impetus for geographers to collect data through online activities.

Qualitative research methods, including ethnography, have been developed to attend to the novelties of the digital turn. Almost two decades ago, ethnographers began conducting ethnographic studies of digital and virtual environments, which are often referred to as netnography (Kozinets, 1997, 2002, 2010, 2015), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2015), or digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016). According to Kozinets, netnography is "ethnography adapted to the study of online communities" (2002, p. 31). Netnography has become a popular method for social scientists from many disciplines, including Anthropology, Media Studies, Sociology, Tourism Studies, and Geography.

While netnography is a powerful research method in its own right, this paper describes some of the merits of adopting it as part of a multi-method approach. This research employs a multi-method approach, which involves netnography in an economic geography study to investigate various individual actors' agency in helping the Jingdezhen ceramics industry cluster in China to establish various kinds of trans-local linkages to drive its revival.

Jingdezhen, located in Jiangxi province in south-east China, is a city-level cluster. It has been called the "Porcelain Capital of the World," and its history of producing ceramics goes back over a thousand years (Gillette, 2016). During the 1990s, Jingdezhen's dominant state-owned ceramics enterprises collapsed and the cluster experienced severe industrial decline. However, owing to various individual actors' interventions, Jingdezhen has been transformed from an old and declining industrial district into a dynamic hub of creative industry. There are approximately 118,700 people involved in Jingdezhen's ceramics industry (Jingdezhen Porcelain Bureau, 2018), including both "local" actors such as local workers, artisans, and entrepreneurs, and "external" actors such as artists and designers migrating from elsewhere in China and from abroad.

In this study, originally, I employed netnography merely in order to collect complementary online information. During and after my fieldwork, I came to recognise how netnography – particularly a more active and participatory approach to netnography (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2012; Mkono & Markwell, 2014) – indeed facilitated and smoothed my use of offline research methods such as interviews. This paper thus reveals that netnography can enhance researchers' data collection in physical spaces in two major ways: first, by increasing the social and cognitive proximity between researchers and their participants; and second, by enabling the spatial and temporal extension of researchers' fieldwork.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, I offer a critical review of the existing literature on netnography, focusing on the merits, problems, and different approaches to netnography in practice. Then, I introduce the multi-method approach that I employed in my study of the Jingdezhen cluster, involving both online and offline research. Finally, I discuss my main findings and reflect on their significance for future research.

2 | A CRITICAL REVIEW OF NETNOGRAPHY: ADVANTAGES, ETHICAL DILEMMAS, AND DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Netnography offers two major advantages over some of the more traditional qualitative research methods. First, it is a powerful research method in terms of accessibility. Informants feel encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences more openly and freely in online communities, where their anonymity is assured. As such, netnography enables researchers to access informants who are rarely approachable through other research methods, including marginalised or at risk people (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013) or those with specific concerns or interests (Bratucu et al., 2014). As such, according to Kozinets (2015, p. 88), netnography is advantageous in investigating stigmatised, sensitive, or even illegal phenomena, which are difficult to study in person. This argument has been supported by many studies, such as Langer and Beckman's (2005) study of a Danish Internet message board for cosmetic surgery consumers and Gurrieri and Cherrier's (2013) study of the Australian "fat activism" movement.

Second, netnography is less obtrusive than many other research methods. It allows researchers to "lurk" online, neither revealing their research activities to their subjects nor participating in online exchanges (Mkono, 2011, 2012). Although this approach has been challenged and criticised, researchers who conceal their presence and simply monitor or observe online activities find themselves able to study online activities in a more natural context and are thus more likely to encounter open and honest discussions (Alavi et al., 2010). However, such a non-participatory, passive approach to netnography encounters serious ethical questions. Kozinets contended that "the uniquely unobtrusive nature of the method is the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness" (2002, p. 65), and even went as far as to argue that ethnographers who do not disclose their identities and act as lurkers are immoral spies. These ethical issues are intimately related to the debate over whether virtual spaces should be conceptualised as public or private spaces (Jeffrey et al., 2021). To address these ethical dilemmas, Kozinets (2002) recommended that netnographers adopt a set of ethical research procedures. First, they should completely disclose their presence, affiliations, and intentions to members of online communities during any research activities. Second, they should protect informants' confidentiality and anonymity. Third, they should pursue and include feedback from informants. Finally, they should exercise more caution when conducting netnography in private spaces than they do in public spaces.

Although netnography is convenient and popular, understanding and utilising it as a way to merely monitor and observe online communities threatens the basis of the approach's qualitative rigour. Lima et al. argued that such a passive approach to netnography is only a "more superficial, less immersive version" of netnography (2014, p. 7). Kozinets

contended that netnography must have a “more human-centred, participative, personally, socially and emotionally engaged vector” (2015, p. 96). Jeffrey et al. (2021, p. 1) similarly argued that ethnographers who simply “download” conversations that have already occurred without actually observing the conversations unfold are unable to understand the complex relationships between actions and context, which are key to ethnographic work.

What then would a more active and participatory approach to netnography entail? First, such an approach requires researchers to become “visible” in the online communities under study and to interact more with members of those communities. Visibility entails researchers disclosing their identities, obtaining informed consent from participants, informing participants of their right to leave the study at any time, and performing member checks. Mkono and Markwell suggest that active ethnography enables researchers to “probe and direct the flow and content of communicative acts online” (2014, p. 290). Such an approach can help researchers co-create value with respondents and develop deeper understandings of the phenomenon under study.

Active netnography entails multiple levels of engagement or participation. On the one extreme, netnographers may merely be “present” and “hang out” in online communities (Jeffrey et al., 2021). On the other extreme, netnographers may conduct participatory action research (PAR) and work with members of online communities to help them, for example, to initiate social change for their own purpose (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020). Thus, passive/lurking and active/participatory approaches to netnography are not binaries; there is instead a continuum between the two approaches. In reality, netnographers can adopt any mixture of passive and active approaches according to their specific research objectives. They may also conduct passive and active netnography during different research phases. For instance, researchers might adopt a passive, observational approach at the beginning of their research to collect basic information to familiarise with the context, and then adopt more active approaches to gain richer insights at a later stage (Costello et al., 2017; Ewing et al., 2013).

Finally, netnography can be adopted both as a complete method in its own right or as part of a multi-method approach. Kozinets (2010) suggested that a “pure” netnography alone is entirely adequate for researchers studying online communities. Other scholars encouraged researchers to straddle physical and virtual spaces in research, and challenged the exaggerated division between offline and online spaces (Burrell, 2009; Miller & Slater, 2000). For instance, Miller and Slater argued that “we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” (2000, p. 5). Accordingly, a number of studies have combined netnography with a range of offline research methods, including surveys, interviews, and participant and non-participant observations (Burrell, 2009; Ghoddousi & Page, 2020; Miller & Slater, 2000; Mkono & Markwell, 2014; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). This multi-method approach helps researchers confirm the accuracy of data collected through netnography and obtain complementary, contextual data as well.

3 | RESEARCH APPROACH: ACTIVE, PARTICIPATORY NETNOGRAPHY AS PART OF A MULTI-METHOD STUDY

This paper primarily draws on my experience in the aforementioned economic geography research project studying the Jingdezhen ceramics industry cluster. I conducted a pilot fieldwork session between September 2017 and January 2018, and my main fieldwork between July and December 2018. I combined and triangulated my netnography with offline research methods – for instance, I conducted 108 in-depth interviews with 101 informants, 48 casual interviews, many participant observations, and some secondary research. Table 1 categorises the 101 interviewees by their occupation.

I asked most of my informants and potential informants for permission to add them on WeChat, a Chinese hybrid of WhatsApp and Facebook. WeChat had 1.15 billion users in 2019 and is China’s most widely used communication and social media application (Zhiyan Consulting Group, 2020). It has a communication function that is similar to WhatsApp, and its WeChat Moment function is similar to the socialising function offered by Facebook. I accessed my informants in two main ways. First, I attended many local events (e.g., seminars, exhibitions, and trade fairs) and attempted to connect with most of the actors likely to become potential informants during or after the event on WeChat. Second, I used the snowball sampling approach and was introduced to other potential informants by existing informants via WeChat.

To ensure that I proceeded ethically, I strictly followed Kozinets’ (2002) ethical research procedures for netnographers. I introduced myself as a researcher, and revealed my research objectives and my planned research activities to potential informants, who could then choose whether to give me access to their posts – if they declined, WeChat was only used to communicate with the informant from then on. Some informants invited me to join certain pre-existing discussion groups on WeChat, which consisted primarily of local actors in the ceramics industry. These groups were rich resources for me. Here too, I revealed my identity and research objectives to the members of these groups when I entered them.

TABLE 1 In-depth interviews: interviewee by occupation

Occupation	Number
Owner or designer, small or medium-sized enterprise	28
Artist	26
Owner or manager, large-scale ceramics enterprise	8
Owner or operator, gallery	7
Manager or facilitator, foreign artist residency	7
Leader or artisan, former state-owned enterprise	5
Professor, local university	4
Individual foreign artist assistant	4
Trader	3
Organiser or manager, creative market	2
Master artist, state level	2
Journalist	2
Editor, local ceramics journal	1
Operator, ancillary business	1
Documentary director	1
Total	101

I adopted a more active and participatory netnography to collect data on WeChat between August 2017 and December 2018. In addition to observing my (potential) informants' activities cognitively, I also interacted with them frequently in virtual space – I regularly “hung out” online (Jeffrey et al., 2021), took notes on informants' relevant posts or discussions, and followed up on these notes later. Thus, the data collected through my netnography included written texts, still and moving images, field notes, and screenshots. I then sorted out the data according to the relevance to my research questions, compiled the relevant data into one file, and coded the raw data to categorise them into meaningful themes.

4 | FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS: HOW NETNOGRAPHY CAN ENHANCE OFFLINE RESEARCH METHODS

In line with Kozinets (2010), I found that netnography functioned as an effective research method on its own. By employing it, I could observe how local ceramics producers' trans-local linkages were constructed through online communities. For example, by conducting netnography, I learned how local producers helped each other promote new products, market new exhibitions, and reach out to potential buyers on WeChat Moment and in various WeChat discussion groups.

More importantly, I found that a more active and participatory approach to netnography significantly facilitated and smoothed my use of offline research methods, such as interviews and participant observations. This approach to netnography is highly effective in this era characterised by ubiquitous and pervasive computer-driven technologies in everyday practices and where physical and virtual spaces are becoming increasingly entwined (Graham et al., 2013; Kinsley, 2013; Leszczynski, 2015). Accordingly, the knowledge, information, and social capital established in virtual space can effectively provide feedback to research activities in physical spaces. As will be discussed, my research shows that adopting a more active netnography facilitates offline research in two major ways. First, it increases social and cognitive proximity between researchers and their participants. Second, it enables a spatial and temporal extension of researchers' fieldwork.

It is widely acknowledged that during qualitative research, a researcher's positionality – including the researcher's gender, ethnicity, nationality, and class – can greatly influence the research in different ways (Kitchin & Tate, 2013). It not only shapes researchers' understanding of self-identity, but also influences how researchers are positioned and “othered” by their informants (Chereni, 2014; Fawcett & Hearn, 2004). Accordingly, researchers' positionality can provide them with specific insights or obstacles, and ultimately influence their relationships with informants in ways that shape the knowledge they generate (England, 1994).

A researcher's status as an “insider” or “outsider” – whether they belong to the group under study or not – is a key dimension of their positionality. The pros and cons of being insider and outsider researchers are contested in the literature.

Many scholars argue that insiders are better positioned than outsiders, as they are able to foster rapport and trust with informants and have a certain shared understanding that helps them obtain more intimate information (Crang, 2003; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hill-Collins, 1990). Others suggest that outsiders are more neutral and objective, can better encourage informants to provide more detailed and contextualised explanations, and can better avoid various forms of politics during research (Dyck, 1997; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Sposato & Jeffrey, 2020). In short, insider and outsider positionalities bring different but complementary benefits.

I am neither originally from the city of Jingdezhen, nor am I an artist or a designer. I am thus clearly an outsider to my community of study. While being an outsider gave me a relatively neutral and critical perspective, it also posed two crucial challenges to data collection during the early stages of my fieldwork. First, due to my lack of social capital, some informants remained sceptical about my purpose. This consequently prevented some informants from accepting my interview requests or sharing their thoughts with me openly to some extent. For example, one trader questioned my purpose and refused to answer some of my questions regarding his distribution channels (Trader 2, July 2018). Second, I had insufficient local knowledge. As Bathelt (2005) noted, cultural differences and embeddedness in different institutional contexts can create massive problems and frictions in transferring knowledge across dispersed and culturally disparate areas. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I found it difficult to understand informants' inside jokes and jargon, their ceramics-making techniques, and some of their social and cultural norms. This hindered my ability to accurately interpret my informants' answers, respond to them, and ask effective follow-up questions.

However, as Mullings (1999) has argued, in reality the insider/outsider binary is highly unstable and ignores the dynamism of positionalities across time and space. Similarly, my positionality evolved and I became more like an insider over time. I realised that such a transition was partly a result of adopting a more active netnography, i.e., interacting with informants frequently, disclosing my presence, or simply being "visible" and "hanging out" in virtual spaces. Consequently, I gradually built trust and credibility with my informants. For instance, some of my informants told me that they often saw my posts on WeChat about my time researching in Jingdezhen (conducting interviews, participating in various local events, or meeting other local actors for meals or coffee). They also told me that they noticed my comments and likes on their friends' posts and my presence in some online discussion groups. They revealed that because of this visibility, they came to not only trust my role as a researcher studying the local industry, but also felt closer to me, as if I was an insider and part of their community (e.g., Artist 3, June 2018; Entrepreneur 24, August 2018; Artist 23, November 2018). This trust made them more willing to open up to me and to provide information that they would not share with a total outsider. In other words, adopting a more active netnography increases the "social proximity," in terms of friendship and experience, with my informants (Broekel & Boschma, 2012).

Second, I became more familiar with the context of Jingdezhen and gained some insider knowledge by taking a more active approach to netnography. This helped me increase the "cognitive proximity," in terms of knowledge bases, with my informants (Broekel & Boschma, 2012). They tended to use WeChat to share diverse perspectives and information relevant to my research and some of this information was only accessible and available on WeChat.

For example, they shared recent professional events that they attended, advertisements about their new products or artworks, casual social events within the local communities, links to articles, books, and TV programmes about local designers or artists, or simply their thoughts about the industry or problems they faced in their production. I was better able to embed myself in the local community after gaining access to this information. I was able to keep up with recent events in the community and developed a good understanding of many local actors' artworks and products. Armed with this knowledge, I could design more appropriate and constructive interview questions and better understand and respond to informants' answers. For instance, when one interviewee (Entrepreneur 22, August 2018) referred to some of her new designs during an interview, I was able to ask a more detailed follow-up question than if I'd not had this kind of access:

Do you mean those cups with bright blue glaze, whose colour has a very high level of saturation? Actually, I find this glaze very different from the ones commonly used in Jingdezhen. Did you invent it or import it from elsewhere?

This question triggered a detailed explanation from the informant on how she learned about glaze chemistry.

The information I obtained in virtual spaces complemented the information I collected in physical spaces in various ways and helped me develop a better understanding of the phenomenon under study. For example, in an interview, an influential ceramist (Artist 11, July 2018) mentioned that he often promoted Jingdezhen's advantages to other peer artists during events, such as seminars held in a number of cities. Through observing the information that the ceramist shared online – including photos, videos, and summarising articles – I was able to develop a more fundamental understanding

of these events. Thus, my active approach to netnography helped me gain additional tacit and contextual knowledge to fully understand the nature of my research topic and informants' activities.

Moreover, this experience showed that while based in Jingdezhen, I was able to collect information about events taking place elsewhere through the use of netnography. This demonstrates that netnography can support a spatial extension of researchers' fieldwork. More importantly, in addition to this break between physical presence and spatial experience of the researcher, the spatial extension also widens the field site from a bounded space that the researcher dwells within into a space in which the social phenomenon under study actually takes place (Burrell, 2009). This helped my research to a large extent, which aimed to investigate the mechanisms through which the Jingdezhen cluster establishes its various global connections. This phenomenon involves various local and global actors and processes, and is thus hard to draw a firm, coherent boundary around. Netnography's spatial extension capacity in turn enabled me to track, analyse, and engage in the phenomenon under study in more detail. This finding is corroborated by Burrell's (2009) and Ghoddousi and Page's (2020) conceptions of the networked, relational, and open field site and fieldwork.

A more active and participatory netnography also supports a temporal extension of researchers' fieldwork. It enabled me to update previously collected data and obtain additional information even after completing my fieldwork in Jingdezhen. For instance, towards the end of my fieldwork, one interviewee (Gallerist 1, December 2018) mentioned that he would organise an exhibition the following year to help local artists build their networks and meet potential buyers. By conducting netnography on a continuous basis, I was able to "see" this exhibition in virtual spaces and obtain information about its impact even after I had left the site. In Taylor's (1999) words, adopting a more active approach to netnography offered me a "plural existence," simultaneously existing as an online "avatar" in Jingdezhen and an offline body in my physical environment. Netnography's temporal extension also enabled me to maintain relationships with my informants even when I was physically absent from the field site. This was particularly helpful during the break between my first and second rounds of fieldwork. During the break, I interacted with my informants frequently and observed the community virtually. Because of these online activities, I felt familiar with the local context and felt trusted and supported by my local informants on returning to Jingdezhen for my second round of fieldwork six months later. My experience of conducting continuous netnography is in line with Burrell's (2009) conceptualisation of the field site as a "heterogeneous" network that incorporates both physical and virtual spaces.

5 | CONCLUSION

The existing literature has identified various merits of netnography as a stand-alone research method. This paper contributes to the literature by demonstrating that an active and participatory approach to netnography can benefit offline research methods and assist researchers with data collection in physical spaces. This happens in two significant ways. First, it helps increase social and cognitive proximity between researchers and their participants. By actively interacting with informants or simply spending time in relevant virtual spaces, researchers can obtain tacit, contextual "insider" knowledge, become embedded in local contexts, and build social capital and rapport with their informants. Consecutively, this facilitates offline research methods by enabling researchers to be trusted by informants, to effectively communicate with them, and to develop a deeper understanding of the topic under study. This is particularly relevant for researchers who are outsiders in the field. Second, it supports a spatial and temporal extension of researchers' fieldwork. It enables researchers to investigate and track the phenomenon under study more closely and continuously, and helps researchers maintain enduring relationships with their informants. This finding moves away from the bounded conception of the field site and corresponds to the networked, relational, and open conceptions of the field site and fieldwork.

Netnography's capacity to enhance offline research methods derives from the increasingly interwoven nature of the virtual and the physical space. Knowledge, information, social capital, and relationships developed in virtual space are often beneficial for research activities in physical spaces, and vice versa. Meaningful future research should, therefore, include further investigations of relationships between online and offline research methods, how they might reinforce each other and provide a more powerful methodology for social science studies when combined. Specifically, when possible and necessary, researchers can adopt more participation and engagement in this multi-method approach, so that deeper, more tacit and contextual understandings of the phenomenon under study may be acquired.

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