

# **On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture**

by

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One methodology recently introduced in the consumer research literature is that of *netnography*, an interpretive method devised specifically to investigate the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet. Netnography can be defined as a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications, where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology.

Judging from the wide-ranging interest in mainstream publications (e.g., Armstrong and Hagel 1996) from conference presentations and papers (e.g., Fischer, Bristor and Gainer 1995; Muniz 1997), and from the content of burgeoning electronic mailing lists, a wide number of the methodological tools that arm consumer and marketing researchers are currently in the process of being adapted and applied to understanding consumer behavior as it occurs over and is affected by the Internet.

Netnography investigates the specific instance in which community is produced through computer-mediated communications (CMC). Groups of people numbering in the tens of millions—and rapidly growing—are now utilizing CMC mediated by electronic mail and specialized

networks, usually linked through Internet, Bitnet and Usenet connections, to build community (Baym 1995). The term gaining currency to refer to this type of social group is a “virtual community” (Rheingold 1993, Wilbur 1997). There has already been some debate regarding the desirability and “reality” of virtual communities (Jones 1995). Yet these social groups have a “real” existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior (Baym 1995, Turkle 1995). Several scholars argue that culture and community are created through communication, and that these virtual communities demonstrate more than the simple transmission of information, but “the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” (Carey 1989, p. 18; see also Fischer, Bristor and Gainer 1995). Virtual communities are “vibrant new villages of activity within the larger cultures of computing” (Laurel, 1990, p. 93).

Internet communities may also be said to form or manifest cultures, in the Geertzian sense of the term as “historically transmitted patterns of meanings embodied in symbols” (Geertz 1973, Porter 1997). The term given to Internet-created culture is *cyberculture*. In anthropology, cyberculture has been conceptualized as the complex field of social forces in which human bodies, machines, and scientific discourses intersect (Escobar 1994). For the purposes of this paper, cyberculture is more narrowly conceptualized as *the shared patterns of behavior and their associated symbolic meanings expressed primarily through computer-mediated communications*. It has been recognized in cultural anthropology that cyberculture represents an important new locus of human cultural activity. As Escobar (1994, p. 218) notes:

Anthropological analysis can be important not only for understanding what these new “villages” and “communities” are but, equally important, for imagining the kinds of communities that human groups can create with the help of emerging

technologies. Again, research in this area is just beginning. We can anticipate active discussion on the proper methods for studying these communities, including questions of on-line/off-line fieldwork, the boundaries of the group to be studied, interpretation, and ethics.

As of this writing, I have researched and written three consumer research netnographies over the last two years, with more planned in the near future. The mistakes and the successful decisions I made along the way inform this paper and I hope that it can provide others with some initial ideas regarding the project of ethnographically exploring cyberculture, focusing particularly on the consumer research context. The following sets of ideas take the form of a combination of some initial and tentative terminological and investigative boundaries, some fairly brief explications of my initial and faltering steps in netnographic field methodology, and some personal observations and examples. Most of this paper will be taken up with explications of netnographic field research methods as they have been developed “on-line” in “real-time.” Due to the newness of the methodology, and to tight space limitations, these guidelines and this discussion are of only the most preliminary constitution. This paper is thus intended to provide an introduction to the topic, perhaps to spur further methodological development. It is certainly not able to serve as a comprehensive methodological source.

## **Netnography: Origins and Uses**

The above-mentioned definition of netnography stresses that both its field work and its textual account be methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology. Observing the general guidelines and traditions of ethnography while adapting

them to the unique circumstances of cyberculture, netnography may be empowered and legitimated through building on anthropological tradition, adapting and drawing on its consensually-derived standards of evaluation where necessary.

Netnography is an adaptation of the qualitative methods utilized in consumer research (e.g., Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988), cultural anthropology (e.g., Geertz 1973, Altheide and Johnson 1994, Marcus 1994), and cultural studies (e.g., Jenkins 1995), with the express aim of enabling a contextually-situated study of the consumer behavior of virtual communities and cyberculture. These methods require an immersive combination of cultural participation and observation, resulting in the researcher becoming “for a time and in an unpredictable way, an active part of the face-to-face relationships in that community” (Van Maanen 1988, p.9). Thus netnography, like ethnography in cultural anthropology and cultural studies, strongly emphasizes full participation in the culture being studied, as a *recognized cultural member*. This participation constitutes an important element of the field work.

The “data” collected during a netnography, as in other types of ethnography, consists of the researcher’s fieldnotes about her cybercultural field experiences, combined with the “artifacts” of the culture or community. In a typical netnography, circa 1997, this data will be mainly textual, consisting of downloaded files of newsgroup postings, transcripts of MUD or IRC sessions, and e-mail exchanges. There may also be some picture files (photographs and artwork) and sound files. In the near future, they may also include digital recordings of teleconferenced gatherings. Netnographic interviews and exchanges have some distinct advantages over their ethnographic counterparts in that they emerge “already transcribed” and thus may be less subject to the vagaries of memory (freeing the researcher’s use of fieldnotes for more

introspective, rather than retrospective, reflection). Netnographic data is thus particularly focused upon textual data, and the limitations and requirements of producing and communicating textual information obviously structure virtual relationships in many ways, including: eliminating and simulating physicality and body [e.g., body language has been virtually replaced by (deliberately) shared (emot)icons], privileging verbal-rational states and skills over nonverbal-emotional ones, and allowing more “pre-editing” of expressed thoughts and thus more opportunities for strategic self-presentation efforts.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Consumer Research Uses of Netnography***

I believe that netnography may prove useful for three general types of studies, and in three general types of ways: (1) as a *methodology* to study “pure” cybercultures and virtual communities, (2) as a *methodological tool* to study “derived” cybercultures and virtual communities, and (3) as an *exploratory tool* to study general topics.

Turkle (1995) self-consciously uses the valorizing acronym RL, popular among many members of the virtual community, to reference “real life” in opposition to “life on the [computer] screen.” I herein define “pure” cybercultures and virtual communities as *those cultures and communities which do not exist in RL, but are manifest exclusively through CMC*. For example, consumer researchers may wish to study the increasingly important and varied

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge the useful comments of an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these important concerns.

consumption of different type of “virtual reality” experience which happen exclusively “on the screen.”

New forms of consumptive experience are carried through electronic means such as multi-user domains (also called multi-user dungeons, and abbreviated as MUDs) where people will interact as groups and dyads, through role-playing and game-playing in different computer-created environments, and will also “produce,” through programming, new experiences for one another to consume (see Ito 1997). Still largely a textual experience (they are mainly formed of words flowing on screen), these habitats are becoming increasingly sophisticated and graphical, even enabling the user to construct “avatars” or pictorial representation of themselves (for example, you might want to visually represent yourself to other MUD users as a lizard dressed in a tuxedo). Virtual experiences that occur over these MUDS, and in other virtual domains, include “TinySex,” which Turkle (1995, p. 21) refers to as “sexual encounters in cyberspace,” and one of her informant elaborates upon as “people typing messages with erotic content to each other, ‘sometimes with one hand on the keyset, sometimes, with two.’”

TinySex, avatars and the wide variety of other experiences offered by the MUD environment and collectively consumed by virtual community members exemplify “pure” cyberculture with no RL analogs. Another set of communities especially interesting to marketers might be those groups of peoples present *exclusively* on the Internet that use brands and product classes as the basis for their interaction (see Armstrong and Hagel 1996, Muniz 1997), but which have no RL counterpart where people meet “in-person.” For example, a number of technically-specific groups have emerged on the Internet to share information and insights regarding various aspects of the consumption of computer technology. While these pure cybercultural groups have

no RL complement, they constitute an important consumer behavior phenomenon in their own right.

I believe that the use of netnography for the study of these pure cybercultural groups and manifestations is most appropriate in this context as a *methodology* in and of itself. Because these phenomena are exclusively based on communities formed from CMC, the use of immersive netnographic techniques allows a researcher to comprehensively cover the entire social context of “life on the screen.” Thus, netnography is methodologically very defensible as a necessary part, if not the major part, of any explication of consumer behavior manifested in a pure cyberculture or pure virtual community context.

This is not to deny the utility of adjunct methods of inquiry, such as in-person or telephone interviews with persons participating as members of the virtual community. Face-to-face contact offers some clear advantages, especially in making tangible amorphous virtual identities. Interviews open to interpretive scrutiny details that may appear hazily or infrequently in the hurly-burly of “everyday” cultural life. A fascinating topography can be explored in the interactions between RL and life on the screen (e.g., do the “gender-bending” activities that frequently transpire on-line translate to more exploratory, “actual,” RL sexual behavior in their participants?, see McRae 1997, Turkle 1995). Given the above, my take on whether or not to supplement netnography with other “off-line” methods is that studies of pure virtual communities should probably be based on a *foundation* of direct participation and immersion in the relevant cybercultures and virtual communities. It seems sensible to argue that methods other than Internet-based fieldwork can also be appropriate as adjuncts to this work, particularly depending on their research focus.

Adjunct methods seem to make even more sense when studying “derived” cybercultures or virtual communities, which I define as *cultures and communities that exist in RL as well as manifesting through CMC*. For example, Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 49) noted and efficaciously studied the presence of “a Harley-oriented computer bulletin board on Internet” that existed in addition to the physical sites of community constituted by bike rallies, swap meets, road trips, and other gatherings. As Internet participation grows, groups which previously existed exclusively in RL are increasingly taking their communities “on-line” and gaining new membership and new experiences. Among studies of these “derived” virtual communities, netnography may prove most valuable as an adjunct *methodological tool*, used in concert with corresponding field work in the RL culture and community, as well as the face-to-face and telephone interviews mentioned above.

Finally, there are a wide range of general consumer behavior topics that might profitably be explored on-line through CMC. The Internet offers easy contact with members of consumer society who might answer general consumer behavior questions. As well, general topics of interest to consumer researchers are manifest in the behavior of many on-line groups. For example, the impact of cross-cultural international membership, the communal mediation of advertising and other promotions through CMC, and a variety of other sociocultural consumer research topics, such as reference groups, expertise, word-of-mouth, and opinion leadership, are manifest in virtual communities.

Some caution may be wise when undertaking netnographic research over the Internet and intending to transfer its conclusions to more widespread (i.e., not necessarily Internet-related) consumer behavior topics. First, there is definitely some “social specificity” in the types of

persons regularly using Internet resources, and thus some concern about drawing conclusions from their study that can usefully be applied to other groups. Notions of representativeness, while not paramount to ethnographic studies in general, may nonetheless limit the potential usefulness and decrease the transferability of netnographic findings.

Secondly, it is important to ascertain that the group being studied is, arguably, a cyberculture or virtual community, as defined above (or a conceptualization of one's choice). There are a number of ways one could determine if this is the case. In my research, I looked for (1) individuals that are familiar with one another, (2) communications that are identity-specific, and thus not anonymous, (3) group-specific language, symbols and norms, and (4) the maintenance and enforcement of in-group/out-group boundaries through, for example, "anti-newbie" postings, "trolling" and "flaming" (see Tepper 1997).<sup>2</sup> The intention of utilizing these four criteria was to ensure that I was indeed studying a culture or community—dictated by my anthropologically-based definition—and not simply examining a temporary gathering.

I raise these red flags not to be preachy, fussy, or nit-picking, but because I believe that, by virtue of its incredible accessibility, the Internet offers an extraordinary number of opportunities for poorly-devised and poorly-conducted research. Especially because this is new (trendy?) terrain, these concerns and cautions are warranted. It is simply too easy and too convenient for a (perhaps nascent) qualitative researcher to go on-line, download a hundred

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<sup>2</sup> A "newbie" is a newcomer to a virtual community. "Trolling" is the practice of trying to lure those who unaware of the in-group's rules to reveal their ignorance. "Flaming" is an on-line (usually public) vicious, insulting verbal attack.

postings or so, write a couple of postings of their own, and claim that they have “done netnography,” all in a single week or two.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, I speak from experience: I have been expedient in my (ab)use of the method once before, and my research findings suffered.

That said, I believe that with the proper preparation, awareness, and a sufficient investment of time, consumer researchers will find the Internet to be an incredibly useful media through which to conduct a wide range of cultural research. A general rule which might be helpful would be that the closer to a “pure” cyberculture the culture one is studying, the more methodologically defensible (necessary?) the inclusion of netnography. The converse is that the more “general” or exclusively RL the consumption phenomenon, the less dependable and less convincing will be the netnographic component of the research. I do not mean, however, to deny the utility of netnographic research findings on general consumer topics as they manifest among Internet users (e.g., race and consumption) –only to complicate positions that unquestioningly generalize them to contexts beyond cyberspace.

## Computer-Mediated Field Research

In ethnography, a set of common issues and obstacles faced by nearly all ethnographers have been identified and have gained considerable familiarity (although no clear-cut consensus has evolved regarding their resolution). These issues and obstacles include: cultural entrée, dishonesty

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that excellent, quality content analyses, surveys, experiments etc. can not be conducted on-line in a very quick and efficient manner, without any foreknowledge of anthropology. It is only to netnography, as a method of *virtual cultural study*, that I refer here.

and misrepresentation, and a host of other pragmatic topics (Altheide and Johnson 1994, Van Maanen 1988).<sup>4</sup>

As this narrative will relate, the Internet is a very strange, even surreal, “space” in which to be conducting research because of the medium’s profound effects on human identity and sense of place. Questions abound about the actual “site” of the research (your own home? a computer server somewhere in Delaware? “cyberspace”?), about who constitutes the base of culture members and informants (their avatar? their “disembodied and decentered self”? their remote physical body?), and about ensuring honesty in answers among a base of faceless and unaccountable informants. In the following sections I share some introductory thoughts about the ways in which these important questions and processes interact with netnographic research techniques, and perhaps open these issues to wider discussion.

### ***Cultural Entrée***

Many of the obstacles to cultural entrée faced by ethnographers are seemingly eliminated in the netnographic entrée into cyberculture. Long distance journeys, unfamiliar languages, personal sacrifices and often dangerous political situations abound in traditional anthropological entrée into the culture of a distant land. Even in sociological studies of groups and organizations,

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<sup>4</sup> Other important issues include approach, self-presentation, and the researcher’s role; gaining trust and rapport; mistakes, misconceptions, and surprises; interview methodology; field notes, data collection and recording; data analysis; researcher introspection; member checks; and cultural exit. Netnography uniquely inflects all of these field research techniques. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, these other topics will not be treated here.

difficult circumstances, politics and power often present immanent hazards that careful cultural entrée choices may help navigate.

In marked contrast, the netnographer can join a culture from the comfort of her own home. As already mentioned, joining cyberculture is frightfully easy: turning on a computer, going to a group, downloading a bunch of information, and posting some opinions or observations to others on the newsgroups. People speak more or less in English, they all seem to be of the same “status,” and there are no formal “gatekeepers” monitoring communications (aside from the often formidable flammers and trolls). Eventually, after several days or weeks of this behavior, one has not only collected hundreds of pages of automatically-transcribed qualitative “data,” but one has become “known” as a culture member. Entrée has been achieved. However, as with any type of cultural research, the greater the front-end preparation and field immersion the more convincing, “thick” or rich, and potentially useful the findings. Like ethnography, netnography requires methodological sophistication in the understanding of the techniques and traditions of cultural anthropology as they affect the conduct of field research. I believe it to be advantageous to predicate cybercultural research upon a significant *mobilizing for field work*.

Not because it is immaculate (far from it), but because it is immanent, I give the example of one of most extensive netnography. In that research, I spent six months investigating the available cybercultures and virtual communities daily before ever posting my first message or e-mailing a single culture member. I non-obtrusively observed, or as CMC users term it, “lurked,” different CMC-oriented areas in order to learn the language, the sensitizing concepts, the content matter and the identities of culture participants that were familiar to members of their communities. I investigated many of the different formats that are possible forums of

netnographic investigation. The five main areas I examined are: (1) World Wide Web homepages, where people post their interests and personal information, and provide links to other on-line pages and areas of interest to them; (2) Usenets, a multifarious collection of interest-specific “bulletin boards” where people can post messages and reply to “threads” of discussion on topics related to the community’s interests; (3) commercial on-line services, such as America Online (“AOL”), CompuServe, and Prodigy which, as well as providing a range of commercial services for their subscribers, provide various forums for (usually moderated) communal interaction and the posting of interest-specific messages; (4) Internet Relay Chat (“IRC”) chat rooms, interest specific areas where people can converse in “real time,” in a process analogous to a telephone call, but in typewritten form, and (5) MUDs, which have been described above.

Each of these “cyber-places” offered different types and levels of interaction and inter(net)activity –each seemed suited for the pursuit of different types of guiding research questions. For example, in my two investigations into media consumption cultures, I investigated their cyberculture while also engaged in a full-time, in-person ethnography of the corresponding RL cultural sites. For the initial, pre-contact phase of the netnography, I used search engines such as Yahoo and Alta Vista, then followed relevant home pages and their links, frequently visiting relevant Usenets, lurking and wandering, reading, downloading, writing reflective ethnographic field notes, and investigating the entire phenomenon while attempting to gain a cultural insider’s perspective.

From what I learned through intensive lurking, I proceeded to construct my own “research home page,” and to contact other people through their home pages. On my World Wide Web home page, I asked people to contact me with answers to several questions about their

consumption behavior, which I termed a “cyber-interview.” I described my research (in general terms, i.e., as best as I could without offering leading questions), guaranteed them anonymity, and asked for their assistance.

Thus, my entrée process evolved through the following five fairly distinct activities: (1) lurking, (2) surfing others’ home pages, (3) creation of my own “research home page,” (4) cyber-interviews (with e-mail follow-up), and (5) Usenet postings. This is certainly only one way to approach entrée. I might have used chat rooms more, for a more “real time” interview feel. However, I opted for a more circumspect, depth, and long-term interview style via e-mail correspondence. If I were studying the interactions of multiple-player combat gamers, a more defensible netnographic research design would stress participation such as spending several months in relevant MUDs, playing the game, and then contacting players through pertinent Usenets, homepages, and e-mail.

After a few more months of making contact in my research, I had formed relationships with several key informants. Initially, culture members wrote me with answers to my cyber-interview questions, I responded with comments and further topics for discussion, and offered to “continue the dialog.” If a member did not respond, I did not pursue it –the signal was clear enough. Of those who did respond, a number explained the conduct and language of the virtual community to me, electronically “showing me the ropes.”<sup>5</sup> Armed with this information, I began entering the relevant newsgroups, and responding to some posts. After several weeks, I felt

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<sup>5</sup> Some time can also be saved by reading the burgeoning literature on rules of CMC conduct (e.g., McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith 1995).

familiar enough with the process to attempt original posts without feeling that I was “intruding” or “steering” the newsgroup to my research interests. My guiding objective was authentic ethnography: to fit in as a cultural insider, and gain the perspective and experience of a member of the virtual community I was investigating, while clearly pursuing a goal of cultural research.

### ***Dishonesty and Misrepresentation***

A major concern in all research is the honesty of the responses upon which a researcher bases her or his conclusions. In netnographic research, this concern is amplified by the uncertain nature of the interactions and respondents. Virtual communities are composed of people who rarely meet face to face, who are largely (but probably not totally) unaccountable for the information they share, and whose identities may be kept permanently anonymous. Because the virtual self is separate from the physical body, and thus apparently from “material” consequences, it might be assumed that this self-simulation is more likely to engage in self-dissimulation. Turkle (1995) argues that Internet identity is constructed, multiple, decentered, and often considered a work-in-progress –and thus manifests in explicitly observable form a postmodern sensibility previously only accessible through theory. To traditional scholarship –even to commonsensical understanding—the extreme immateriality of Internet identity can seem almost intractable.

Our understanding of the ways in which virtual identities interact in virtual communities (and, on the larger stage, in a virtual world) is at a very early stage of understanding. One of my own observations is that there is a tradeoff effect at work: the same freedom which inspires people to mischievously construct deliberate falsehoods about themselves and their opinions also

allows them and others the freedom to express aspects of themselves, their ambitions and inner conflicts, that they would otherwise keep deeply hidden (see also Turkle 1995).

Devoid of the kinesthetic clues of body language, netnographers may be blinded in a way that in-person researchers are not. However, netnographers may need to develop compensatory technical and interpretive skills in order to offset this blindness. Ethnography and netnography do not judge veracity, nor depend on it, so much as they study interpretations. Certainly netnographic research will be affected negatively if fictive interpretations are carelessly added to more faithful expositions –however, subject to sufficiently probing analysis, these untruths may well reveal interpretive insights of their own.

Vigilance is never a bad idea. Methodologically, Wallendorf and Belk (1989) note that ethnographic research “integrity,” the lack of impairment by “misinformation” and “misrepresentation,” can be facilitated by well-developed field research techniques such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, gaining rapport and trust, triangulating across sites and sources, using good interview techniques, and researcher introspection. These sound methodological guidelines apply also to netnography. Over time, with patient observation of any virtual community, with a few key informants with whom one has built a strong and trusting relationship, and with a deep understanding of one’s own inner identification as a culture member, a netnographer is likely to be able to separate the wheat from the chaff, and construct a representation faithful to the interpretations of bona fide culture members.

## **Conclusion**

As this brief methodological overview suggests, netnography offers a qualitative technique by which consumer researchers may investigate cyberculture, virtual community, and a wide range of consumer experiences that manifest in and through them. There are numerous methodological, ethical and representational topics associated with netnography that remain to be explicated. Below, I will deal with a few I feel are most immediate.

In an information-drenched society, netnography offers an extremely easy way to gather data, and thus can be critiqued as an expedient technique. Critiques of rigor should rest, however, not in the apparent accessibility of the field techniques involved, but in how the research is actually performed (rigorous methodological guidelines), and how its outcomes are to be evaluated (rigorous judgmental standards). Ease of data collection may contribute to trivializing Internet-based technique until some early methodological guidelines are negotiated for its use, and some early standards for quality evaluations are developed and agreed upon. At the same time, it is also important at this early stage to encourage experimentation and innovation in the construction of a wide-range of interlocking interlocutory Internet-based methods.

To promote such an outcome for netnography, experimental freedom and concerns about legitimacy must be woven together in investigations that both conform to and, where necessary, deliberately stretch widely-accepted standards governing quality evaluations of ethnography in consumer research, as well as adding several from cultural anthropology (e.g., Altheide and Johnson 1994, Marcus 1994). Prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation of sources, recording of field notes, and member checks seem to me to be the most important methodological techniques (see Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988, Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

Demonstrating that these techniques are being applied may help netnographers convince others that their field research is being conducted in a serious, long-term, and accountable manner.

From the interpretive techniques used in cultural anthropology, there are a number of widely accepted conventions that lead to additional quality judgments of the text (Altheide and Johnson 1994, Marcus 1994). I believe the notions of verisimilitude (providing a lifelike simulation of the culture), reflexivity (consciously recounting the inevitable effects of the researcher participating in the culture), and authenticity (giving proof that one was actually accepted as, and felt oneself to be, a culture member) also need to be treated in the netnographic text.

Ethical concerns must be addressed by specifying how informed consent was obtained, how the dignity and interests of community members were respected, and by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality where required. This is especially important in the downloading and use of ostensibly “public” postings –I have found that people have somewhat paradoxically refused me permission to anonymously quote their posts. Others, who have posted their writings but are unreachable, are still legally and morally in possession of the copyright on their productions (i.e., researchers can not “appropriate” apparently public postings without permission).

Finally, the textual representation of netnography presents new challenges for traditional techniques, and opportunities for new representational styles such as poststructural anthropological “messy texts” (Marcus 1994) and evolving textual representational methods such as hypertext and hypermedia. One very interesting opportunity is for multiple researchers to study “the same” virtual community independently at the same time (although this community,

like the proverbial river, is constantly changing). Rather than aiming at an objective “researcher triangulation” on the way “things really are” in cyberspace (Woolgar 1988), such investigations could enrich our field by exploring the different interpretations bound to emerge from the investigation.<sup>6</sup>

In short, I believe it very helpful for aspiring netnographers to immerse themselves not only in “virtual fields” but in the history and methods of cultural anthropology. Sherry (1991) coined the apropos term “the researcher as instrument” to refer to the individualistically unique set of observational and hermeneutic skills needed by interpretive researchers, a term which refers no less to netnographers than ethnographers. As the methodology continues to develop, it is possible that the netnographic technique may evolve to become a useful tool of twenty-first century consumer research.

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<sup>6</sup> I wish to acknowledge and thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this very exciting possibility.

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