

VIRTUAL VIEWS FROM THE INSIDE: FOUNDATIONS FOR NETNOGRAPHY B2B CASE STUDY RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Netnography applies ethnographic research principles to exploration and analysis of online communities. Insights into online conversations based on social computing principles of interaction, meaning and culture are drawn from data streams (big data) out of multiple network representations within the Web as a digital object. Network representations includes the physical digital network (“the Internet of Things”); online locations and applications where conversations are taking place; conversation content; persons or entities conversing; and the social object that the online community is built around. Netnography has focused largely on a business-to-consumer perspective on consumers conversations about products, services and experiences. Understanding how B2B online communities are created and developed is critical for setting up foundations for B2B netnography research. The IMP Social Media Interaction Framework (Sood & Pattinson, 2012) focused on online communities is an effective platform for B2B netnography research.

Keywords, Netnography, Ethnography, Webnography, Interaction, Networks, Online Communities, Social object, Internet of Things

Work-In-Progress Paper

NETNOGRAPHY AS ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

Netnography applies ethnographic research principles to online communities. Kozinets (2010) developed principles for netnographic research building on ethnographic research principles and methods. He reinforced links between ethnography and netnography:

I have always emphasized how netnography adapts a range of extant ethnographic practices—such as making cultural entrée, keeping fieldnotes, interviewing participants, using hermeneutic interpretation, and ensuring consent and a fair cultural representation—to new internet-mediated contingencies. (Kozinets 2013)

Kozinets emphasises ethical netnography research with clear member checking and validation of data representation. Netnographic research still requires triangulation using offline sources. The researcher's identity and activities within an online community should be known, disclosed and collected information should be checked with the community. Researcher identity and activities is linked to their position relative to the observed online communities i.e. Observing From Above ("Overview"), Observing Across ("Viewing The Layers"), or Observing From Within ("Embedded"/"Immersed") – see Figure 1.

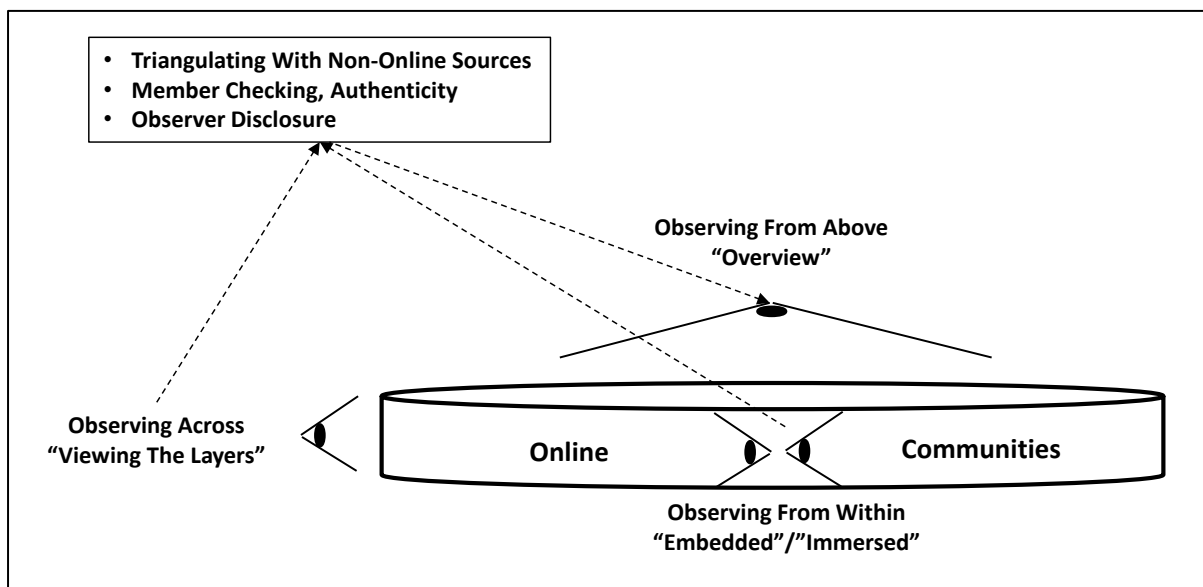


Figure 1: Netnography: Observing Position Relative to Online Communities

Another version of Netnography, *Webnography* is defined by Puri (2007, p. 388) as ethnography for the World-Wide Web – but viewing it “as an object of study, and to search for insights into the ‘natural conversations that occur in various web forums’”. As Webnography is typically managed by marketing research consulting firms, data “anonymization” and aggregation are key principles with less focus on member checking and validation of data representation.

SOCIAL COMPUTING: FROM VIRTUAL TO ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Kozinets and Puri recognize conversations are central to researching online communities. Kozinets recognized Rheingold's (1993, p. 5) definition of virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from Net when enough people carry on ...public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". Kozinets elaborated Rheingold's definition into key elements for researching online communities:

- Social aggregations' (collective)
- 'Emerge from the net' (internet is focal source of data, also may in one or more online location and/or application)
- 'discussions' or 'communications' (focus on exchange of meaningful multimedia symbols and information)
- 'enough people' (minimum number of people to feel like a community)
- 'public discussions', (accessibility to discussions)
- 'long enough' (community with ongoing relationships)
- 'sufficient human feeling' (authentic contact with people in community)
- 'to form webs of personal relationships' (social engagement of individuals with each other in community)

(Kozinets, 2010, p. 8-9)

Virtual communities (or more commonly known today as online communities) can be traced back to Social Computing. Vrasidas & Veletsianos (2010, p. 10) developed a theoretical foundation for social computing based on: *individual versus social constructivism, situated and distributed cognition, and local and non-local communities of practice* - interrelating between *Interaction, Meaning, and Enculturation*. Web 2.0 (and its Social Web component, Social Media) emerged as a platform incorporating principles focused on user control, user-generation of data, focus and collaboration and use of applications to produce and improve data – and services emerging out of such collaboration (Pattinson, 2013; Reilly 2005). Web 3.0 principles offering semantic, tagging and advanced virtual entity features enhance these principles, which are aligned with theoretical foundations of Social Computing.

The Web is a digital object containing multiple network representations including;

- A physical "internet of things" network – a Web Platform with more than a billion uniquely identified devices connected to it in 2012 rising to over 27 billion by 2020 (Varley 2013, p.148). Each of these connections generates streams of data
- A network of applications where conversations are taking place
- A network of conversation content
- A network of persons or entities conversing
- A network of social object or purpose for conversation and online community

From a social computing perspective, interaction occurs within and across these networks, individually or collectively, producing streams of big data to be managed through an emerging e-research perspective. This "4th research paradigm" is built around a data science approach of discovery, patterns and knowledge focused on action i.e. insights, sensemaking and action to "Ask, Understand, Execute" (Elowitz, 2013). Figure 2 outlines Conversations as Data Streams in the Web as a Digital Object.

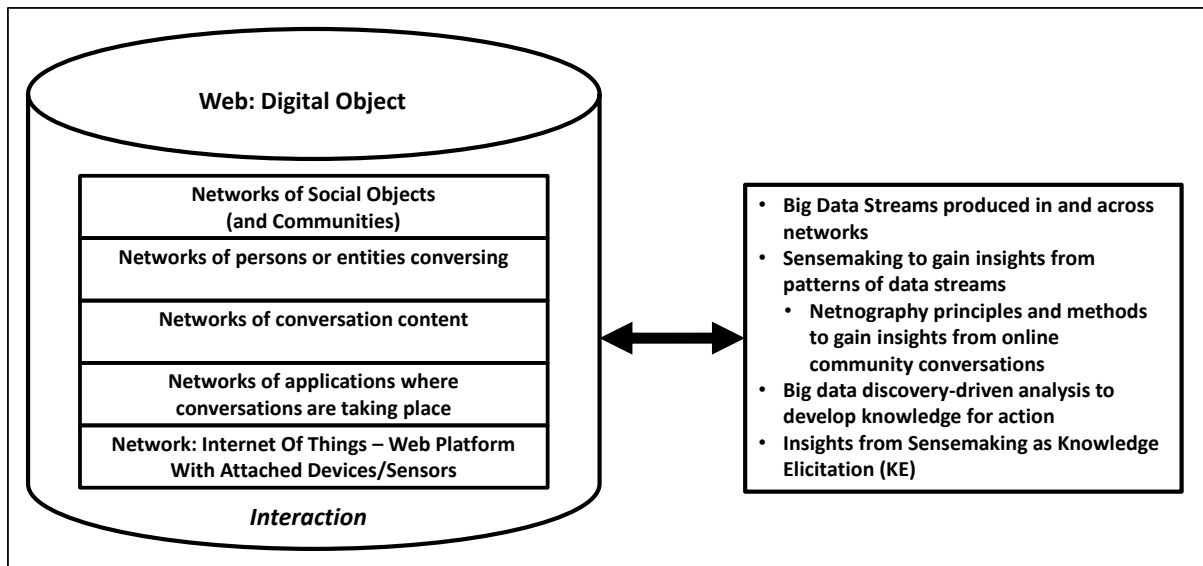


Figure 2: Conversations as Data Streams in the Web as a Digital Object

The top layer “network of social objects” highlights the purpose for creating, developing and maintaining online communities. Specific activities, actions, events, issues, or common interests are required for an online community to be created, developed and sustained. Netnography principles and methods are applied as sensemaking to gain insights specifically from data streams representing online community conversations based around social objects. These insights become knowledge elicitation helping researchers and marketers understand more about online communities, and marketers to interact and market to relevant communities.

B2B NETNOGRAPHY: CHALLENGES, PURPOSE AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To date, netnography research has been deployed almost exclusively to Business-to-Consumer marketing related projects, focused largely on consumers conversations about products, services and experiences including Business-to-Consumer marketing related projects (Belz & Baumbach 2010), New Service Development (Sigala 2012), exploring Consumer + Consumer-to Business (cc2b) online buying groups (Chen 2012), and cruise liner experiences and wine estate events (Sloan et al 2012) .

Ethnographic and related research approaches are well established for B2B Case Study Research (Woodside, Marshall & Pattinson 2013 forthcoming, Woodside 2010), and are effective for exploring insights and issues related to the IMP Interaction Model. Research into B2B online interactions has developed since the mid-1990’s from the Worldwide Web as a driver for industry transformation (Pattinson & Brown 1995) through to B2B E-Marketplaces, Web 2.0 and Open-Source Collaboration (Pattinson & Sood, 2006), online B2B Sales Management and Conversations (Sood & Pattinson, 2010), and developing research agendas for B2B Social Media Marketing (Sood & Pattinson, 2010, 2011).

A distinct B2B Social Media Marketing research agenda based on IMP principles is developing, but so far actual B2B netnography is scarce. At first glance, defining, identifying and researching networks of B2B actors interacting online – essentially packaged as B2B netnography – would seem to be reasonably achievable. Vocabulary around established

communications, interaction, meaning and enculturation all seem to fit an IMP Interaction perspective of networks. An updated IMP Social Media Interaction Model (Sood & Pattinson 2012) offers a framework to explore and analyse social media and online data streams within different forms of exchanges to be compiled and expressed as co-operation and adaptations, and to produce social media driven online service capabilities.

B2B Netnography research requires creation and nurturing of B2B online communities. B2B community creators or managers in 2014 are charged with creating or nurturing online communities around a defined social object – although the “creator or manager” could be from further up or across from a supply chain or be and-user or downstream who wishes to converse with whoever is interested in their social object no what actual or implied position may held in a B2B network. Figure 3 positions B2B Online Communities based in a Single vs. Business Network Perspective.

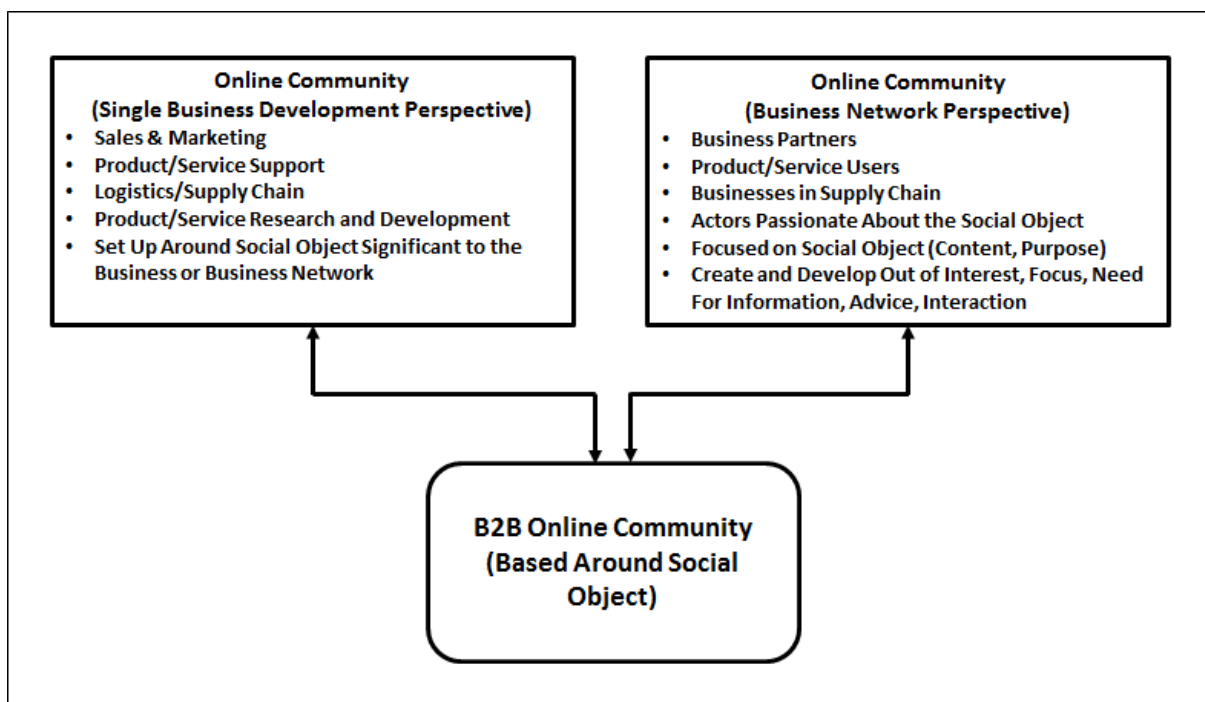


Figure 3: B2B Online Community: Single vs. Business Network Perspective

Single businesses may possess B2B marketing capabilities to create and develop B2B online communities where the social object is their products or services or supply chain activities. Actors within business networks also can create and develop online communities where the social object may be products or services or supply chain activities or issues related to them.

Figure 4 presents an application of the IMP Social Media Interaction Framework specifically on online communities to inform B2B Netnography research. Information Exchange highlights the forms and streams of online conversations, including Mobile Voice and SMS communications, and Mobile/Fixed Internet Communications and applications. Social Exchange focuses on human interaction elements giving a sense of feeling, engagement and meaningful multimedia symbols, vocabulary and information around the social object. Product/Service Exchange and Financial Exchange are viewed in this context as, where relevant, defining the social object of the online community. Actors go to the online

community to find answers or information or to raise concerns or issues on product/service and financial issues.

Cooperation through exchanges focused around a social object can create and develop online communities. Online Communities adapt and develop (or decline) through adaptations including co-creation, crowdsourcing, customisation, linking to other online communities, and to changes in social objects. Netnography based on an IMP Social framework focuses on co-operation and adaptation of B2B online communities through social media information, social, product/service and (where relevant) financial exchanges.

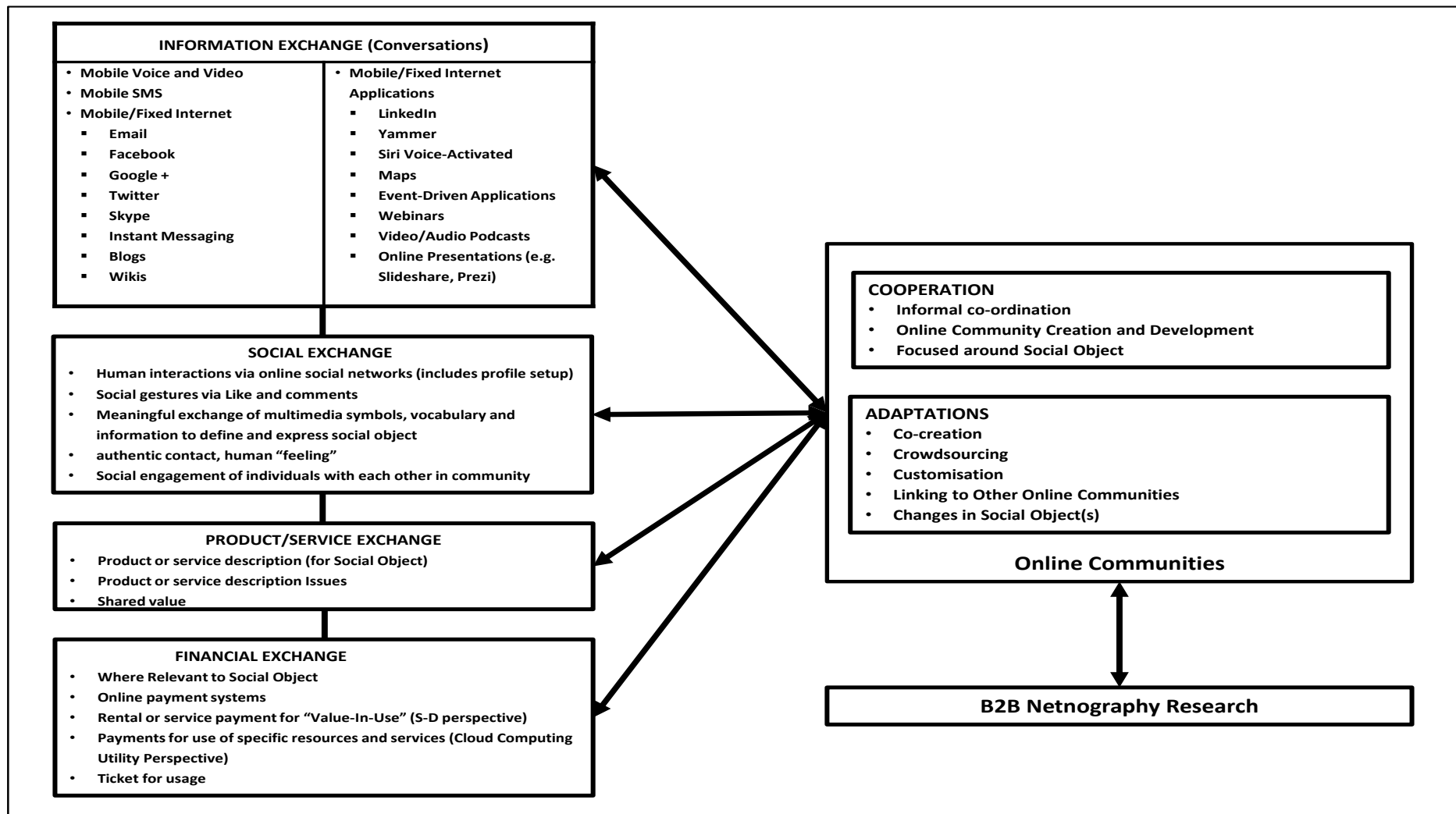


Figure 3: B2B Netnography Using an IMP Social Media Interaction Framework (Adapted from Sood & Pattinson, 2011)

B2B netnography research based on the IMP Social Media Interaction Framework could produce a variety of “outputs” including:

- Creation, development and adaptations of online communities
- Who influences creation, development and adaptations of online communities
- What constitutes information and social exchange in online communities
- Creation and development of products, services, processes and capabilities within – and out of – online communities
- How and when online community conversation content becomes inputs for product and online service content
- online processes, software applications, systems and platforms supporting online communities
- online processes, software applications and systems and platforms connecting online communities with other B2B interaction streams
- Identification of key “networks or networks” including physical “internet of things”; applications where conversations are taking place ;conversation content; persons or entities conversing and the social object or purpose for conversation and online community

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE OF B2B NETNOGRAPHY

Netnography is usually viewed as online ethnography, but representations of online communities are evolving with advancing of increasingly powerful Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 platform-based interactive social computing applications, systems and environments. Viewing online communities as multiple representations of networks within the Web as a digital object, generating big data streams, challenges definitions and approaches to researching them. Furthermore, B2B online community creation and development can be viewed as within the B2B marketing capabilities of a single or across a business network where a variety of actors can create and develop those communities. The social object or purpose for the online community can be products or services offered by a company or this plus processes and capabilities offered by a business network.

The IMP Social Media Interaction Framework is useful for setting up B2B netnography research based on online communities created and developed through cooperation and adaptations. Defining the expanding “Internet of Things” for specific online communities will be vital for analyzing and sensemaking multiple network representations built on exploding set of data streams emanating from it. Advancing social media applications and collaborative information (conversation) platforms challenge IMP perspectives on interaction, but can be addressed through the IMP Social Media Interaction Framework to produce new thinking, and new online product and service innovation and capabilities.

Further developments out of this paper will include application of principles discussed to a set of B2B netnography projects. This paper develops principles for netnography research based on social computing. However, big data analysis and associated e-research principles point toward from social computing principles to a new “Behavioural Computing” foundation (Cao & Yu, 2012) – and netnography research will have to adapt to this new research paradigm. These developments will be explored and discussed in future research.

B2B researchers now have the means to create, see and have conversations about the virtual views from the inside of online communities.

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