# Virtual methods and digital methods: examples of netnography and digital ethnography for a comparison between methods for analyzing the digital scenario in tourism studies

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**Starting from the idea that…**

«Web-mediated research [...] is already transforming the way in which research practice and traditional research methods transposed on the Web» (Amaturo, Punziano, 2016)

**We intend to…**

…retrace the main differences that substantiate the strands of virtual methods and digital methods formalizing the main differences between the applications of ethnographic techniques when they are framed in the Virtual or Digital Methods

*«Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience»*
A. Rageh, T.C. Melewar, and A. Woodside, 2013

*«Generation Y: evaluating services experiences through mobile ethnography»*
M. Muskat, B. Muskat, A. Zehrer, and R. Johns, 2013

# The starting point: the classical ethnographic method

«Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, […], in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts» (Hammersley, Atkinson 2007)

**Ethnography is a method based on direct observation**

| Level of participation | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Not participant** | Passive participation | | Moderate participation | | Active participation | Complete participation |
| **Lurking** | | | | | | **Participation** |
| **Content Analysis Approach** | Informing members about the research purposes | Asking clarifying questions | Posting comments | Getting involved in the community activities | Taking a leadership role | Auto-ethnography |

# The New Scenario

The Internet logic has drawn spaces and languages for relations, actions and practices that the social research examines to understand the complexity of social change through the Computer mediated communication (CMC).

## Virtual Methods (Hine, 2000)

- **Cyberspace** intended as a place allowed to file big amounts of information useful to realize how large could be the part of the social culture present online and considering internet not only a cultural context, but as well a cultural artefact, a flexible, dynamic and pervasive object.
- An **adaptive mood** where the information that permit to understand a social setting in a fieldwork switched online in the way that i.e. the survey becomes web survey or the interview becomes web-interview, with a difference for the observation actions that can find a proper use also with a no intrusive configuration.

## Digital methods (Rogers, 2007)

- **Hybridization** of classical techniques and digital environment (the net): not simply a series of techniques useful to analyse web available data that describe social actions but also an investigation on 2nd sources following the medium and understanding the information produced by users or best by social platform.
- **Replacement** of cyberspace *second life,* refusing the online/offline, virtual/real coexistence and using the web also as source and not only as the object of study. Is no more important to understand how much culture was online, but instead how to «focus the cultural change and social conditions through internet thanks to the digital native informations».

# The online ethnography

**The internet revolution had a profound impact on ethnography:**

The online ethnography breaks with the traditional methods of the discipline because all the data is usually collected online without meeting the people concerned face-to-face.

## Nethnography

The *cocktail* that Hobbs (2006) describes as the repertoire needed to understand a particular culture, conduces the traditional research actions, most of the observation, in a switch to the web environment where real communities become web-communities preserving, or creating, substantive networks and relations into the cyberspace in the way where nethnographic object is the social aggregation that «emerge from the Net when enough people carry on […] public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling to forms webs of personal relationships in cyberspace».

## Digital ethnography

The practice that arises simultaneously with the environment inside it works, and is capable to enlarge and analyse every relations cluster not concerning the subjects in a place as the virtual world, but rather in a temporary association of strangers made for mutual purposes in a cooperation that will lose its properties also after few hours of its highest density moment of sharing.

# Braking points between methods

Principal definition of the method and kind of understanding actions required to the researcher by level and kind of participation

Conceptualization of the field

Main technique

Research actions and their level of importance

Involvement of the observed

Involvement of the observer

Level of involvement by time

Kind of used data

Propensities and extreme in ethnographical practices

Kind of access

Way to collect secondary data

Way to collect/construct primary data

Where is the ethnographer?

Level of intrusion

How to reach the interpretation?

Evolutive scheme of research

Gains

Threats

# Findings: Studies on tourism and comparison of the "Virtual netnographic" and "Digital ethnographic" perspective

According to our common interests, we refer
two example of Tourism studies, the best fund in
literature which lend to the comparison aim.

«*Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience*»
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«*Generation Y: evaluating services experiences through mobile ethnography*»
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**«Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience»**
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Focused on the *customer tourism experiences* and aimed to identify *its underlying dimensions* through the validation of concepts isolated *a priori* and concerned in the literature within the tourist industry in Egypt.

Stated on the adaptation of ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications.

Adaption of ethnographic techniques starting from transposing a traditional structure of investigation on the online research field.

The authors consider the web as a flexible, dynamic and pervasive object where in fact, through the cyberspace, is possible to study the visitors' experiences thanks to their online reviews.

**Reading techniques (analysis of reviews)**

**Not involved obsver and observed (unobtrusive observation)**

**Nethnography**

Hybridization of the method by choosing a curvature towards non-intrusiveness instruments and the secondary digital data already present on the network, in a way more closed to the ratio of the ethnographical practices in the frame of Digital Methods.

Aim to understand how museums are experiences-centered places and how its are perceived by Generation Y thanks to the identification of the customer journey, providing an insight into service experience consumption and deriving managerial implication for the museum industry of how to approach Generation Y.

Based on the innovated idea of *mobile ethnography* that sees the individuals dressed simultaneously as consumers and as active investigators capable to give back opinions about their personal vision of a product, a service or an experience.

The process concerns the information delivering from the user and the data collection from the researcher in the same time, and in the real time of the action.

The empirical basis has been built concerning the only digital native elements: data are directly produced, and then collected. so extracting material from the net directly connected to the social phenomena that the researcher will analyze making primary use of secondary data

**Digital ethnography**

**User-centered design of the method**

The customer who decides how, when, and what evaluate of his experience: all through a device that brings to the researcher a translated data that could not be intended as the result of a singular research action, but rather a new kind of output that involves together observation, querying and reading action in an unobtrusive way.

# Open Conclusions

Tacking out the fact that the net of a temporal subsequently between the methods, the virtual ones are not expired in disuse for social research and the digital ones are still in their attesting phase. Although the understood practices can be used as extremes nethnography and digital ethnography can no longer be thought of as placed on a continuum that allows gradualness in the intermediate choices to be made by firmly fixing the starting points , the cognitive objectives and the results to be achieved.

**Can it still be said that ethnographic practices are always so appropriate in the new scenario?**

**Do these really work better than their classic version?**

**What classic structures could, instead, be recovered/re-evaluated?**

**What is the scope of exclusivity of the two methods and to what extent can they coexist or merge? What happens to ethical issues?**

**Can they really be shelved without particular reflection? How much will it be necessary to use digital or digitized data instead of shifting the research to the data produced by sensors completely reversing ontology and research actions?**

# Thank you

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