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Understanding a shifting methodology

A content analysis of the use of netnography in hospitality and tourism research

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Abstract

Purpose – While netnography was established to study virtual communities from the traditional ethnography methodology, over time it has evolved and moved away from standard ethnographic practices. The modifications are especially prevalent in hospitality and tourism research because of the nature of experiential and service-based goods. This gap has created exciting new opportunities for researchers. As netnography has matured into its own methodology, it has provided the opportunity for researchers to use netnography techniques or more traditional techniques by following ethnography methodologies. This paper aims to analyze the differences between these two methodologies within hospitality and tourism literature enabling researchers to choose the methodology that is most suited for their project.

Design/methodology/approach – This study reviews netnographic research in hospitality and tourism and compares current uses of netnography against traditional ethnographic methodologies.

Findings – There are four major differentiating points between netnography and ethnography: online community definitions, data collection methodologies, ethics in research and data analysis techniques.

Practical implications – In comparing ethnography and netnography in hospitality and tourism research, this analysis provides a foundation to evaluate the best use and best practices for these two distinct qualitative methodologies in the field. The study also provides references to how other hospitality and tourism researchers have used netnography.

Originality/value – Ethnographic principles grounded in the foundation of anthropological doctrines are important and distinct from netnography. The ability to use the diverse tools in the qualitative methods toolbox will help hospitality and tourism researchers understand the transforming marketplace.

Keywords Online community, Ethnography, Netnography, Data analysis, Research ethics, Participant observation

Paper type General review

1. Introduction

Ethnography which translates to "culture writing" is the foundation of the field of anthropology. This technique has been incorporated into other fields such as hospitality and tourism to enhance the methodological toolkit of researchers. Anthropologists often consider ethnography to be more than a technique of qualitative research. Instead, ethnography is viewed as a comprehensive methodology with guidelines, moral and ethical codes, and a strong heritage for providing the theory of description in conjunction with other theoretical understandings (Nader, 2011). To study online consumption communities, researchers adapted ethnographic methodologies to fit the virtual realm (Kozinets, 1997).

Netnography is the use of adapted ethnographic techniques to study online consumer-based communities. By using online data, netnography offers advantages over traditional

ethnographic studies such as the availability of readily accessible information which can reduce some of the time-consuming nature of ethnographic research by providing additional resources for comparison and study, considerably reduced costs relative to traditional fieldwork methods while providing insight into a naturally occurring community (Kozinets, 2006, 2002, 1998, 1997) and access to potentially difficult to reach populations that may otherwise not be included in consumer research (Wu and Pearce, 2014a; Mkono, 2013c). As online communities continue to grow, methods to monitor and gain insight into the interaction of customers in these communities is especially important for experiential services and goods that hospitality and travel industries provide. Organizations need to extract the information that helps create value for the consumer and netnography provides a means to accomplish that. The potential for netnography is recognized by hospitality and tourism researchers (Tung and Law, 2017) because it offers an in depth and meaningful look into consumer insight.

In Kozinet's (2015) newest book edition describing netnographic methodologies, he questions and explores how netnography is diverging as a research method from traditional ethnography. Despite his work, many of Kozinets' (2015) prescriptions are not followed in hospitality and tourism research. Studies using netnography have grown in popularity and have attracted a number of researchers across many business-based disciplines (Kozinets, 2006). Tourism and hospitality products offer a wide variety of choices that are often complex in scope which leads to complexity in decision-making for the consumer. As a result, Fairchild (2017) revealed that consumers spend a lot of time reviewing travel information online before making final purchase decisions. On average, consumers visit 140 websites during their search process.

The easy access to data attracted many researchers. With its increased usage as a consumer behavior methodology, researchers have continually adapted and shifted the netnographic techniques beyond the foundation of ethnographic best practices. While some of the studies are well grounded in methodology adapted from anthropology's well-formulated, well tested and long-established ethnographic techniques which Kozinets (2010) originally advocated, other researchers have developed their own methodology moving away from this foundation.

Marcus (2012, p. 13), a recognized thought leader in anthropology, warns that ethnography's growing popularity and adoption by scholars not formally trained by the anthropological traditions "threatens to undermine its validity and effectiveness." Boellstorff et al. (2012) further this sentiment in their manual covering best practices in virtual ethnography *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* with the fear that ethnography will become so broad that it will become obsolete. Because of the adaptations of ethnographic principles online, it is important to review the current uses of netnography to compare current hospitality and tourism studies which use netnography terminology with traditional ethnographic practices and principles. A crucial element of establishing the best research methodologies is through continual evaluation, adaption and comprehension.

This paper aims to compare the current uses of netnography in hospitality and tourism often stated to be founded on the work of Kozinets (2015, 2010, 2006, 2002, 1998, 1997) against the established ethnographic methodologies from the discipline of anthropology. The evolution of netnography away from ethnography is important to understand. There is need to create a clear distinction in order that the rigors of qualitative hospitality and tourism research remain strong and viable for future studies. By comparing the new path of netnography with the traditional path of ethnography, researchers will be able to use the methodology that best fits their objectives for research. This separation provides clarity for researchers conducting studies in the field and provides clarity on best practices. Qualitative methods like ethnography and netnography are powerful tools to not only see trends but

also understand where the trends came from, why they exist, how they are integrated in the minds of the consumer and what organizations and brands can do to co-create value both digitally and physically. In separating netnography from ethnography, researchers will be able to analyze the content from the rigors of methodological guidelines that are replicable across studies based on the research questions and the available platforms.

2. Literature review

2.1 Characteristics of ethnography

The fundamental goal of ethnographic research is to "understand the cultural contexts in which human action takes place" (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012, p. 16). Boellstorff *et al.* (2012) discuss the demanding nature of ethnography which includes lengthy stays in the field, active participant observation, intense involvement and engagement, dedication of time, emotion, and energy, flexibility in research design and questions, dedication to the care of informants, committed avoidance of deception and open revelation of research intentions. In anthropology's history, ethnographers would often spend multiple years studying a particular community in the field looking for holistic interpretations and understandings. However, this is no longer feasible or preferable. Limited resources and time compelled ethnographers to have more succinct research agendas before engaging in community research (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). This shift in the foundation of anthropology led to shifts in research design toward focused research questions (Clifford, 1986). Within the context of online studies, ethnographers can use a variety of possible platforms including message boards, websites, forums, listservs, multiuser dungeons, chat rooms, social media, video games or video sites to study and to immerse in a culture or community.

As the views of Clifford (1986), Nader (2011) and others explain, ethnography is not a casual and easy methodology. Ethnographic work takes a significant amount of time, patience, dedication and hard work. To maintain the rigors of field research in cultural studies, handbooks and methodological texts typically describe hallmarks of ethnography. Some of these tenets include:

- ethnography is rooted in the interpretation and the concept of culture;
- ethnographers must become intimately involved with members of the community;
- ethnographers must commit to authenticity and accurate reflection of cultural members as a spokesperson of the community;
- ethnography uses inductive, interactive and recursive theory-building processes; and
- ethnography is highly contextualized (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999).

Although contextualization provides understanding of a group, it also leads to challenges in developing generalizations. Ethnographies by nature are centered on the workings of a specific group and grounded in the localized norms. While this leads to high levels of specification, it also provides a richness and open-endedness that allows for adaptation of the knowledge to other cases and scenarios which is a "classic strategy" of ethnography (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012). The flexibility of the ethnographic research method is one of its greatest strengths. Despite the specificity, the ability to change and flow with the needs of the study and the research questions makes this methodology one of the most impactful and provides adaptability to many fields of scholarship (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999).

2.2 Characteristics of netnography

In Kozinet's (1998, p. 368) original methodological adaptations, he stated that both ethnography and netnography require "methodological sophistication in the understanding of the techniques and traditions of cultural anthropology." Netnographies use metaphorical, hermeneutic and analytic interpretation of the data which emphasizes the crucial role of the researcher to correctly and properly evaluate the research (Mkono, 2012).

3. Methodology

The original development of netnography as an adaptation of ethnography used cultural anthropology as the foundation of the methodological techniques. With the changes in methodological practices over time, it is crucial to examine netnography separately from ethnography based on current practices to determine differentiating points between the two above and beyond currently held netnography principles. A content analysis was conducted to identify, to critically evaluate and to synthesize the published literature on netnography in the hospitality and tourism industry (Fink, 2013; Myers, 2013). This was done by identifying the similar themes within the research then extrapolating common areas of discrepancy. The content analysis follows the prescription from Mohammed *et al.*'s (2015) review of economic research in hospitality and tourism journals. Analyzing data through content analysis allows the information to be examined in meaningful ways to draw valid deductions or inferences in an objective manner (Mohammed *et al.*, 2015).

A search was conducted using Google Scholar and a major university database (e.g. EBSCOHost, Sage Publishing, ScienceDirect and Elsevier). The key words in the search comprised three combinations: "netnography tourism hospitality", "netnography hospitality" and "netnography tourism". These keywords were selected based on commonly used keywords in the literature.

From the total hit count of 2,130, the first 100 articles were selected from each search sorted by relevance. These articles were then paired down by matching articles between the data sources and searches. Next, each article was evaluated by reading the abstract and methodology portions to ensure the study claimed netnography as the methodology and to confirm topics related to hospitality and tourism. Papers that used similar methods but did not cite netnography were not included in the study (Watson *et al.*, 2008) as were any articles not directly related to hospitality and tourism (Wang *et al.*, 2017). Mkono and Tribe (2016, p. 289) assert "there are significant differences between ethnography and netnography, and it would be an oversimplification to characterize netnography as 'online ethnography'." As this research focuses solely on the current uses of netnography as adapted from ethnographic principles, other forms of qualitative community research methodologies (e.g. virtual ethnography, online ethnography) were excluded and discussed in Future Research. In addition to these criteria, only articles that were full-length and published in English were used (Mohammed *et al.*, 2015).

A total of 63 articles were reviewed for this study. Rather than presenting each article as in independent piece, and thus risk neglecting the overall dynamic methodological use, this analysis focused on a comprehensive discussion, a technique used in previous research (Morosan and Bowen, 2018). The publications were then read and categorized according to the data collection technique, the sample selected, the type of analysis and the ethics.

4. Results and analysis

Table I provides a summary of the profile of papers used in this study. One of the more relevant findings indicate that there has not been significant growth in the use of netnography in hospitality and tourism literature. Hopefully, this paper will generate the use

Category	N = 63	(%)
Year		
2006	1	1.6
2007	2	3.2
2008	0	0
2009	2	3.2
2010	1	1.6
2011	6	9.5
2012	7	11.1
2013	12	19.0
2014	10	15.9
2015	6	9.5
2016	6	9.5
2017	10	15.9
Journal		
Tourism Management	9	14.3
International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research	7	11.1
Annals of Tourism	6	9.5
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	5	7.9
Journal of Travel Research	4	6.3
Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal	3	4.8
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research	2	3.2
Journal of Vacation Marketing	2	3.2
Tourism Management Perspectives	2	3.2
International Journal of Tourism Cities	2	3.2
Other Journals	21	33.3
Topic		
Tourism/ Destination image	34	53.9
F&B	11	17.5
Employment	7	11.1
Airlines	4	6.3
Lodging	3	4.8
Service	2	3.2
Festivals	2	3.2
Sample		
Forum/ Online community	25	39.7
Reviews	19	30.2
Blogs	10	15.9
Video sites	2	3.2
Marketing campaign	2	3.2
Other	5	7.9
Data collection		
Non-participative methods	53	84.1
Participant observation	9	14.3
Experiment	1	1.6
Disclosure		
Non-disclosure	22	34.9
Disclosure and/or Consent	7	11.1
Not clarified	34	54.0
	(*continued*)	

Table I.
Summary profile
of tourism and
hospitality papers

Category	$N = 63$	(%)
Data analysis		
Thematic analysis	29	46.0
Content analysis	7	11.1
Discourse analysis	5	7.9
Textual analysis	5	7.9
Mapping	4	6.3
Grounded theory	4	6.3
Not specified	9	14.3
Coding		
NVivo	8	12.7
Other QDA Packages (e.g. Atlas 6.1, QDA Miner, Wordsmith)	7	11.1
Manual coding	6	9.5
Not specified	42	66.7
Other findings	*Not part of 63*	
Used in citations/Explanations	37	
Discussed as future research	20	
Discussed in design/Review papers	20	

Table I.

of netnography in future studies. In addition, the results found in Table I produced four major themes for areas of incongruity between netnography and ethnography: sample type, data collection technique, level of disclosure and data analysis approach. These incongruities relate to Kozinets' (2002) methodological guidelines.

4.1 Sample type: online communities

The study of culture is a hallmark of ethnographic research (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). In ethnographic research, it is imperative that the unit of research is a distinct community rather than a collection of basic online commenters that do not form a community through interactions, membership and group identification. Characteristics of online communities rather than non-community-based online communications include:

- identity-specific communication usually in the form of avatars;
- familiarization with other group members;
- the maintenance and enforcement of community rules;
- group specific language, symbols, and norms (Kozinets, 1998);
- object-rich environments;
- multi-user interactions;
- shared social environments; and
- co-inhabitation with others (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012).

These criteria rule out mediums which are non-group interactive networked environments such as social platforms like Facebook (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012), network sites like LinkedIn or review websites like TripAdvisor unless they are used as tools for interaction between distinct cultural and community members. A platform does not designate the status of a community. The community exists as a result of specific functions regardless of the tools

used for communication. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate a community from communication.

Defining online communities consistently with how anthropologists would define cultural communities would exclude standard review websites because they lack crucial member interactions that create the standards of recognized communities (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012). For example, in Mkono's (2013a) investigation of authenticity in tourist restaurants in Victoria Falls, she not only assessed online reviews but also spent time physically present in the restaurant to become a participant observer. It would be unlikely for her to interact with other group members online because the platform does not allow for customer-to-customer interaction.

In Burns and Cowlishaw's (2014) study of UK airline communication between the organization and consumers the researchers evaluated the corporate websites, annual reports and press releases. This study strays far from traditional ethnography as there are no community members or interactions and there is no existence of an online presence. In marked contrast, Tavakoli and Mura (2015) investigated a purely virtual realm which only exists in the ephemeral online world. Their study looked at how Iranian women adapt their identities and behavior to the social norms within Second Life, a virtual tourist destination simulation. Although their study explicitly examines a purely online community, their methodology is more akin to a quasi-experimental method rather than an ethnography. The researchers recruited young Iranian Muslim women to join Second Life to follow their path through the virtual realm. While Second Life creates an online community, this study does not specifically examine the online community but instead individual adaptions to the community through experimental methods.

The blogs used by Woodside and his colleagues (Martin and Woodside, 2011; Hsu *et al.*, 2009; Martin *et al.*, 2007; Woodside *et al.*, 2007) also pose a unique situation. These blogs could potentially be part of a bigger community, however when separated as single users the important interactive and contextual understanding is lost. These studies provide valuable insight into consumer creation of brand destination image. They are not strictly part of a community, however, and this precludes ethnography as a methodology for such studies. Osman *et al.* (2014) similarly only studied content from individual posts rather than the dialog between posts from their blogs when they coded and analyzed tourists' interpretations and narratives about McDonald's abroad.

Rokka and Moisander (2009, p. 201), conversely, study a purely online community they describe as "a social network or tribe of consumers who engage in online interaction via computer networks." Their study investigated how the desire for ecological and environmental changes in tourism practices brings individuals together to form communities. The community is defined by consumer participation in discussions via forums or chat rooms about topics that are shared interests or experiences and exist in the ephemeral, nonphysical space online. "The members' shared lifestyles and tastes, sense of belonging and collective consciousness, common rituals and practices, emotional links, and even shared moral responsibilities" define the community and often result in demographic heterogeneity (Rokka and Moisander, 2009, p. 201). Rokka and Moisander (2009) interpreted the dialogues between group members as cultural texts and explain the dissemination of environmental knowledge through the online community.

Shakeela and Weaver (2014) studied an inflammatory tourism incident that was posted on YouTube. Their study evaluated reactions and commentary from viewers around the world using textual discourse analysis. While it seems that this kind of interaction and communication would lend itself to ethnography, one of the key attributes of communities is missing in that the discourse and interaction is short lived. After 18 days, the researchers

stopped collecting data because the posts significantly decreased within the first few weeks. This distinction proposes that a true online community must have continued member interaction and ways to differentiate members from nonmembers.

The current publications examined show a dichotomy of online content between content created in community groups and content created purely for communication about a tangible experience or product, yet both kinds of content are currently being evaluated by netnography. Based on these findings, there is a need to differentiate the methods used for studying community cultural groups differently from communication based online platforms. While Kozinets (2015) claims that culture and community have become "unstable concepts" in anthropology this does not negate the underpinnings of socially constructed communities in online realms. There are clear and stable examples of these communities which have existed through many decades such as the well-known Harley Davidson community HOG and a plethora of Disney communities such as the DIS which have strengthened and grown over time. Adaptation and change in the social environment and interactions do not necessarily equate to instability. With the existence of these strong and definite groups, there is a need for further ethnographic inquiry into online consumption communities.

4.2 Data collection

While ethnography incorporates many data collection techniques such as individual and group interviews, surveys, historical document analysis and any other techniques deemed important and beneficial to aid in understanding the research questions, the cornerstone of ethnographic study, and subsequently netnography, is participant observation (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012; Marcus, 2012; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). Participant observation requires in depth immersion into the community, prolonged engagement and researcher identification by cultural members along with a combination of participation and observation through persistent conversations and interactions. Both participation and observation lead to active involvement and temporary membership with the studied community. This requirement for participant observation, however, is a major differentiating point between netnography and ethnography.

Participant observation is an important part of understanding culture. Without participant observation, the data analysis is more similar to coding than to ethnography. The temptation to do so stems from the far easier task of coding cultural data than living, probing, and understanding it (Kozinets, 2006). Without detailed cultural knowledge found through participant observation, a cultural study would not have the impact or reliability necessary to inform important decisions or create a valid understanding. Participant observation is fundamental for ethnography, in that it also provides critical insight which allows the researcher to fine tune and reassess the research questions during the data collection process (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012). While digital records such as the previously existing communications provide valuable insights into the history of the field site they cannot stand alone without the interactions and detail provided by participant observation (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012).

According to Kozinets (1998, 366) early work, netnography "strongly emphasizes full participation in the culture being studied, as a *recognized cultural member*". This sentiment was not changed in Kozinets (2015, p. 177) more recent publication as he states, "participation as a group, community or cultural member is nonnegotiable" and "simple observational downloads, web-crawling, or data mining are insufficient without researcher participation. The presence of the researchers' experience in research representation is key" (p. 243). Agreeing with Kozinets, La Rocca *et al.* (2014, p. 699)

pointedly express that "to gain a deep understanding of the community it is not enough to observe and monitor online practices from a distance and to identify and classify the themes in aggregation." They go on to explain that immersive involvement is required with firsthand experience which leads to acceptance as a trusted community member. This view falls in line with the principles of ethnographic research; however, it is not mirrored in current practices of netnography.

Despite Kozinet and La Rocca *et al.*'s views, most current netnographic research in hospitality and tourism does not include participant observation with researchers advocating for non-participant observation methods of data collection. Using the vast quantity and variety of consumer reviews available online, many researchers analyzed the already available content rather than actively participating in an online community by the means of ethnographic principles. For example, Mkono (2013b, 2013c, 2012, 2011) used the available marketing messages found on company websites and reviews found on TripAdvisor, Virtualtourist and Igougo to study authenticity in dining experiences for tourists at Victoria Falls; Woodside and his colleagues used personal online blogs as storyboard maps to tell narratives about different destination brand images in Bologna and Florence (Woodside *et al.*, 2007), Mumbai, Seoul, Singapore and Tokyo (Martin *et al.*, 2007), Beijing, Lijiang, Shanghai, and Xi'an (Hsu *et al.*, 2009) and Tokyo (Martin and Woodside, 2011); and Rageh *et al.* (2013) found reviews on holidaywatchdog.com and TripAdvisor to evaluate the customer experience at hotels in Sharm el Sheikh.

Other examples include Dias *et al.* (2014) who evaluated reviews found on HomeAway. uk.com to study vacation rental behavior in Albufeira, Portugal and Small and Harris (2014) who used newspapers in online formats and television news sites to examine travelers opinions about crying babies on planes. Additionally, Janta and her colleagues studied Polish migrant workers in the UK hospitality sectors by reviewing online Polish communities found on gazeta.pl, mojawyspa.pl and ang.pl (Janta and Ladkin, 2013; Janta *et al.*, 2012; Janta, 2011; Janta *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b).

While most hospitality and tourism researchers debate the use of participant observation, a few followed ethnographic methodologies and become actively engaged in the online community. Dwivedi (2009) spent time passively observing (lurking) and studying two message boards in which he later became an active participant. His research investigated the online destination image of India from a consumer perspective by engaging with two of the largest and highest-ranking travel communities for independent tourists to India, Lonely Planet's The Thorn Tree and Indiamike.com (Dwivedi, 2009). Hallem and Barth (2011) claimed to use both participant and non-participant observation by studying some threads and by participating in other threads to understand the perceptions of medical tourism, specifically cosmetic surgery, in Tunisia. They also followed up with certain community members to conduct private sessions for further analysis. In an interesting combination, Jensen *et al.* (2015) triangulated their study on European interrail travel by predominantly focusing on an auto-ethnographical methodology with a supplemental interpretation of online content. While they did not actively participate online, instead reading Facebook comments passively, they did spend a significant amount of time conducting physical fieldwork.

Some researchers state that the limitation of netnographic research is the inability of the researcher to guide topics and discussions, probe for clarification or details or confirm demographic information (Osman *et al.*, 2014; Mkono, 2013c). Goulding *et al.* (2013) detail these limitations for non-participative research, including:

• lack of control for participant selection;
• participants choose discussion topics and control the direction the discussions take;

- the researcher cannot ask for clarification, further detail or elaboration on central themes; and
- researchers rarely have the opportunity to explore individual histories or backgrounds.

These limitations severely hamper researchers' abilities to explore all the dimensions and depth of the social phenomena; however, if the research is conducted using participant observation, these inabilities are not only minimalized, but they are often removed fully. These limitations show that despite the availability of non-participant data collection with netnography, there is still a need for ethnographic methodologies in online research.

For example, Wu and Pearce (2014b) mostly observed interactive posts on the Chinese travel community Qyer.com. However, they did follow up with blog contributors to complete missing demographic information and to ask for clarification. While they did not actively post, the researchers' length of involvement, their choice of a highly interactive community and their temporary membership allowed them to have communication with the community members to overcome limitations described by researchers who do not participate in the community. They were also able to conduct important member checks which help refute potential researcher bias and increase research credibility. According to Shenton (2004), qualitative researchers should actively strive to increase the trustworthiness of the research by reducing researcher bias. One of the proposed methods of accomplished increased credibility, and consequently increased trustworthiness, is by conducting member checks which allows group members to evaluate the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations, inferences, participative dialogues and emerging theories (Shenton, 2004).

4.3 Ethical research

When conducting field research, ethnographers must fully disclose their presence and ensure confidentiality and anonymity (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Despite the opportunity to mask researcher presence in online communities, this does not relieve the researcher of responsibility towards the informants and cultural members. Deceptive practices, such as cloaking researcher presence, directly go against the spirit and ethics of ethnographic field research (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Even in the case of previously published content, the necessity for researcher disclosure, permission, and consent remain critical topics of discussion and evaluation. Because of the fact that the information was not necessarily created for researcher interpretations, a very crucial ethical concern is the necessity to reveal research intentions and gather consent from contributors. Privacy, confidentiality, appropriation and accurate representation are critical elements in the ethics of ethnographic research (Kozinets, 2002). Online communities present an intercept between public and private where personal experience and consumption intersect.

Some netnographic researchers advocated for full disclosure of researcher presence and intentions online, while others disagree with the necessity of doing so in spaces which are dedicated to public discourse online. The most widely cited work which supports the stance for non-disclosure in netnographic research is the work of Langer and Beckman (2005) (Osman et al., 2014; Shakeela and Weaver, 2014; Rageh et al., 2013; Hallem and Barth, 2011; Janta, 2011). Langer and Beckman (2005) argue that disclosure can negatively impact participation and change the organic nature of the conversation because of the effect of researcher engagement and exposure. They specify this impact especially when investigating communities that focus on private or sensitive matters, such as health. Their study examines the conversation surrounding cosmetic surgery, something that is rarely discussed in public (Langer and Beckman, 2005). By maintaining the absence of known

researcher presence, community members can discuss cosmetic surgery without taboo and the potential anonymity helps members save face and distance themselves from the risks of condemnation and denunciation (Langer and Beckman, 2005).

In a different interpretation, Goulding *et al.* (2013) state that as researchers are incapable of discussing participation in person, especially given the wide spread of community members, the researcher must decide the level of risk toward the participants and judge the necessity for consent. If the risk is considered low, and the topics are not sensitive or personal in nature, then the publically available information can be used freely. Mkono and Tribe (2016) similarly reflect that the non-personal nature of the discussion topics indicates that there is no ethical obligation to reveal research activity. These two perspectives between Langer and Beckman (2005), Goulding *et al.* (2013) and Mkono and Tribe (2016) directly conflict with each other and can support implied consent for both sensitive and insensitive content. One consensus among Langer and Beckman (2005), Goulding *et al.* (2013) and Mkono and Tribe (2016) is the necessity to protect participants through hiding obvious identifiers including avatars and quotes. In a similar argument to Goulding *et al.*'s (2013) about the widespread variability of participants, Osman *et al.* (2014) argue that the size and diversity of the sample make it unfeasible to gain consent from all participants.

Other researchers plainly state that they do not believe it is necessary to obtain consent for online content because of its public availability. As users have complete control over what is posted, and the content is openly accessible, they do not feel it is necessary to ask for permission (Osman *et al.*, 2014; Wu and Pearce, 2014a; Rageh *et al.*, 2013; Hallem and Barth, 2011; Mkono, 2011). Wu and Pearce (2014a) argue that the guidelines for consent to study online communities are "too rigorous and endanger the unobtrusiveness of online communication studies" (p. 465). Rageh *et al.* (2013) assert that the increased normalization of electronic communication and public forums has negated the need for consent because of poster understanding of the universal opportunity for interpretation, access and use of online data.

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) (2004) states that consent can be assumed in cases where "the respondent is free to determine the level and nature of the interaction between participant and researcher" (para. 21). With publically available content, however, this relationship is not created because the participant never truly has a choice without giving explicit permission. This still leaves some room for interpretation because researchers who do discuss the ethics of using publically available content discuss that the ability of participants to remain anonymous or pseudonymous allows protection for participants even though it is publically available content (Mkono, 2011). Janta (2011) details the fact that although she did not inform participants of her presence or obtain permission to use their posts, she did delete the names of the participants to ensure anonymity. To remain anonymous, it must be difficult for others to determine the identities of the participants. This anonymity is possible with online reviews, forums and comment sections through carefully chosen pseudonyms, but is highly difficult with personal blogs or online journals which can readily be traced online to their original source. There are additional complications in true online communities because of recognition by fellow group members, an issue which is often discussed in the ethics of ethnographic writing.

A different interpretation of consent may be to only ask community leaders. The AAA (2004) asserts that certain situations require the consent of community authorities before a researcher is given access to community members. Typically, in these cases, individuals may be at risk for research participation without the sanction of the authoritative bodies. This authoritative consent provides blanket consent for all group members as long as those individuals are still given the choice to participate. If the online community has a clear

governing body, then an alternative to individual consent can possibly be superseded by leadership consent. Dwivedi (2009) took this approach when he sought permission from the moderator of Lonely Planet's The Thorn Tree and the owner of Indiamike.com for his study on the online destination image of India from the consumer perspective. Sigala (2012) also gained leadership permission through consent from Starbucks to use their website content and conduct further research. Wu and Pearce (2014a, 2014b) followed this suggestion in tandem with arguments made by other researchers. While they did not gain consent for reading and analyzing blog material, they directly contacted and asked for permission to use any photographic material and direct quotes which were published in their articles. However, Wu and Pearce (2014a) argue that it is unnecessary to fully disclose researcher presence unless individually contacting group members for clarification, permission to directly use content or member checks.

The AAA (2004) disagrees and clearly states that implied consent does not absolve the researcher from fully disclosing the purpose and procedures, risks and benefits, plans for use and protection of participants. Their statements create a very decisive interpretation of researcher obligation and ethics with ethnographic methodologies, even if written consent is not mandatory. While netnography may not require full disclosure based on data collection techniques and the type of group being evaluated, traditional ethnography does especially, as researchers are expected to become participants within the communities.

4.4 Data analysis and software use

Where traditional physically based ethnographies interpret people, online cultural studies interpret behaviors and conversational acts because of the asynchronicity (the ability to edit before communicating) of representation through online mediums (Kozinets, 2002). Online researchers are unable to assess tonal shifts, pauses, cracked voices, eye movements, body language or movement away and toward other members because of the limitations of technological communication (Kozinets, 2006). These nonverbal communications are virtually replaced by emoticons and punctuation allowing more opportunities for strategic self-presentation (Kozinets, 1998). Online studies not only provide rich descriptions and interpretive depth (La Rocca et al., 2014) but also allow for structured analyses around conceptual schemes and ideas (Wu and Pearce, 2014a).

When assessing participant observation data, the researcher, already intimate with the material, engages in a "rigorous intellectual process" to understand the material from an even deeper level (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 159). The goal of this process is to not only discern the underlying patterns of behavior and interaction, but to also facilitate the writing process. The act of writing is as much a part of ethnography as the field research itself and should be treated like an equal counterpart to the data collection stage of the research. Statistical analysis, coding, qualitative data analysis (QDA) software and other analytic tools remove the researcher from the process based on the computational and quantitative nature of these types of analyses. This conflicts with the important central role the researcher plays in the analysis and writing and should not be used in place of intimate manual analyses in the case of ethnography.

While consent, ethics and disclosure and participant observation define practices in conducting research and data accumulation, it is equally important to assess analysis and data evaluation techniques. When a researcher is actively engaged in the community through participant observation, the examination of thematic elements should be done manually (Boellstorff et al., 2012). In fieldwork, the researcher is the tool who lends strength and understanding of the contextual results found through the research. QDA software, while powerful and useful, does not have the same capability as human researcher

interpretation because of the nuances of thought, feeling and emotion which are lost in non-sentient analyses.

However, if the researcher is evaluating downloaded reviews instead of actively engaging, then the software becomes a constructive tool for analysis. When evaluating customer experiences at hotels in Sharm al Sheikh, Rageh *et al.* (2013) used NVivo to help find relevant themes to compare to the proposed hypotheses. Similarly, Dias *et al.* (2014) used WordSmith to analyze the posts they downloaded from HomeAway.uk.com, and Richelieu and Korai (2014) used QDA Miner to evaluate the consumption experience of Tim Horton's coffee products by looking at posts from the company's online campaign *Every Cup*.

Another reason to use QDA may be the presence of an overwhelming amount of data to interpret. When they evaluated perceptions of medical tourism in Tunisia, Hallem and Barth (2011) not only participated in forums and private interviews but also reviewed and downloaded several existing threads. The researchers chose to use NVivo to perform their analysis and confirm their hypothesized theories. Osman *et al.* (2014) also used coding since they were analyzing 85,654 words in 784 posts which resulted in five major themes with 44 sub themes. While they did not specifically use QDA, the coding process is more akin to this technique than analysis typically performed in ethnographic methodologies.

Conversely, Mkono (2013c) used a manual interpretation of the data using thematic analysis to understand authenticity in touristic dining experiences. She stated that her ability to do so stemmed from the relatively small data set which allowed her to examine the material numerous times to extract thematic elements contextually. Wu and Pearce (2014b) also discussed their ability to manually assess their data set because of its reasonable size; however, they first coded the material and then created categorical themes based on those codes. Shakeela and Weaver (2014) independently coded with the help of NVivo before analyzing and discussing the results to reach a single conclusion about the material. Once the coding was completed, they qualitatively evaluated the data using textual discourse analysis. Langer and Beckman (2005) specifically address deviation of using coded material from recommendations for qualitative textual analysis. Langer and Beckman (2005) like Wu and Pearce (2014b) chose to manually code the data before interpretation but acknowledge that this was in opposition to the originally proposed analytic techniques for netnography.

Other researchers chose to follow ethnographic methodology by manually and qualitatively evaluating their collected data. Both Goulding *et al.* (2013) and Rokka and Moisander (2009) considered their analytic techniques to follow the practices of textual discourse analysis, while Janta and her colleagues (Janta and Ladkin, 2013; Janta *et al.*, 2012; Janta, 2011; Janta *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b), Mkono (2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2012, 2011) and Jensen *et al.* (2015) used thematic analysis, and Small and Harris (2014) followed the procedures for critical discourse analysis. Mkono (2012) recognizes that there are a number of qualitative ways to analyze netnographic data. She states "to be more accurate, netnography is a combination of various methods and techniques which can include content analysis, historical analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, narrative analysis, and thematic analysis, among others" (Mkono, 2012, p. 389).

5. Discussion and implications

While netnography is growing in popularity and every top-tier consumer behavior journal in marketing has published articles based on netnographic data (Kozinets, 2006), it is still relatively underutilized as a mainstream qualitative methodology in hospitality and tourism (La Rocca *et al.*, 2014; Mkono and Markwell, 2014; Rageh *et al.*, 2013). Before netnography can be used to its full potential, there needs to be a well-defined set of rules and parameters to ensure credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity, generalizability),

dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity) (Shenton, 2004). To ensure the rigors of methodological practices, researchers should not only look to text book definitions and descriptions but also evaluate the practitioners who use the methods in the field. Based on this kind of research, there are four main departing points between the use of netnography versus ethnography in hospitality and tourism research: data source, data collection techniques, ethics in research design and data analysis.

Ethnography expressly looks to understand human behavior as it relates to social interactions in the setting in which those interactions occur (Wilson, 1977). The foundation of this point of view is the belief that human behavior cannot truly be understood in isolated and sterilized environments and is inherently impacted and changed by the environment around groups of people that form communities. While the methods for conducting online research and its interpretation are different than those conducted in physical spaces, participant observation remains crucial in any kind of ethnographic research. Cultural scientists believe that a researcher can only truly understand a phenomenon by personally experiencing it, emotionally and physically. Reflexive interpretation is a key component of the data analysis, and without it, the research will not show the true complexities and realities of its existence. For this reason, the hallmark of ethnographic research is participant observation in the field. If a researcher is evaluating consumer interactions such as relationships within a brand community then the researcher should use ethnography.

When conducting participant observation research there are clear standards for disclosure and consent. The AAA (2004) clearly recognizes the importance of full researcher disclosure in field research using ethnographic methods as well as the necessity for consent (Kozinets, 2015). Once the data collection stage has been completed, the researcher as the primary tool for analysis should then evaluate the reflexive experiences from the participant observation to reach conclusions from personal involvement which reflects his or her own theoretical understanding. The personal analysis of the results is a crucial step for ensuring trustworthiness and an in depth and rich understanding of the cultural phenomenon. Therefore, all analyses should be conducted manually without the aid of QDA software.

While netnography was originally developed to study online communities from the perspective of consumer behavior marketing, it has shifted to incorporate a wider variety of online phenomenon. Accordingly, there are instances where the online content available should not be studied via ethnographic methodologies because either the content lacks the crucial components of an interactive community or the researcher is not studying the interactions of the online content. Based on the content analysis of the hospitality and tourism literature, it is clear that netnography does not require participant observation. This is because of the nature of netnographic research which does not evaluate interactions between participants. For example, if a researcher is investigating destination image, word of mouth behaviors, rating systems or data content instead of consumer relationships, then it is unnecessary to conduct participative research.

Similarly, the medium being evaluated will influence the data collection technique. While different mediums may serve as both social media conglomerates and places where online communities are formed, the researcher must first assess the source of data. Characteristics of online communities include shared consciousness; rituals and traditions; sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001); identity specific communication usually in the form of avatars; familiarization with other group members; the maintenance and enforcement of community rules; group-specific language, symbols and norms (Kozinets, 1998); object-rich environments; multi-user interactions; shared social environments; and co-inhabitation with others (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012). For example, Facebook as a whole is a social media conglomerate; however, within Facebook, individual communities may grow

and thrive. In a case like Facebook, the researcher would evaluate the group under study to determine if he or she were studying the community within Facebook or the entity in its entirety. However, if the researcher is assessing online content that is not part of community functions (e.g. reviews, isolated blogs and collateral), then the researcher should use netnographic methodologies.

Where ethnography requires full disclosure and consent because of direct researcher engagement, netnography does not require full disclosure. However, netnographers should still use protective practices by either acquiring individual consent or use anonymous or pseudonymous sources. As netnography requires neither participant observation nor community-based interactions, researchers may use the sophisticated tools provided by QDA software without negatively impacting the evaluation process. As seen in Table II, netnography offers a variety of alternative options for qualitative research of online content while differentiating the methodology from traditional ethnography which can study consumer interactions.

6. Conclusions
6.1 Implications
In comparing ethnography and netnography in hospitality and tourism research, this analysis provides a foundation to evaluate the best use and best practices for these two distinct qualitative methodologies in the field. The study also provides references to how other hospitality and tourism researchers have used netnography which gives future researchers the opportunity to rigorously explore different online content qualitatively. Based on the results of evaluating hospitality and tourism research, researchers are able to explore other facets of online content that do not fit into the requirements of ethnographic principles such as sample type (non-community based), data collection method (non-participant observation), ethics (non-disclosure) and data analysis technique (QDA assisted).

6.2 Limitations and future research
Netnography is only one of many qualitative methodologies which can be utilized to evaluate online interactions or online communities. Other methodologies include virtual ethnography, digital ethnography, online ethnography, cyber ethnography, natural language processing, critical social research, life world analysis and social network analysis. To limit the scope of this study, this research focused only on netnography in comparison to traditional ethnographic methodologies. Future studies should analyze how other qualitative methodologies are utilized in hospitality and tourism research. Subsequently, an

Methodology	Ethnography	Netnography
Research question	Interactions between consumers, organizations or consumer-organization	Isolated communications (e.g. reviews, blogs, collateral and individuals)
Data source	Community	Online data (e.g. company websites, review websites, social media platforms and forums)
Data collection	Participant observation	Non-participant observation
Ethics	Full disclosure, consent	Non or full disclosure, individual consent
Data analysis and software use	Manual analysis	Manual analysis, QDA software

Table II.
Researcher guidelines

important piece would also cross compare the methodologies to enhance researchers' understanding of the nuances between different techniques (e.g. netnography versus ethnography in hospitality and tourism versus other business-based disciplines).

6.3 Conclusions

As the review of netnography in hospitality and tourism research has shown, it has moved away from traditional ethnography principles. With the changing landscapes of online research, netnography has shifted to fit the needs of researchers in hospitality and tourism specifically regarding data source, collection, analysis and ethics. This provides an opportunity to further define and refine netnography as unique and separate from its ethnographic history. The ability to use the diverse tools in the qualitative toolbox will help hospitality and tourism researchers understand the transforming marketplace and more effectively evaluate the content most important to the field and the industry. Netnography, as a non-intrusive examination of readily available content, provides a means to quickly, efficiently and cost-effectively understand hospitality and tourism consumers.

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