TECH3022-18 Social Media Practice

Lecture Four: Netnography

1   Ethnographic Principles
"Applying a systematic mixed method approach can reveal many facets of a culture, such as its hidden social structures. But the grounding element, the core of these methods, should be cultural understanding if that approach is to be termed a netnographic one"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 182).

Important we:
✓   Are immersed in the settings.
✓   Act as participants.
✓   Listen to what people tell us.
✓   Record observations in our journals.
✓   Reflect on our own experiences.

1.1   Online Communities
"Online communities are not virtual. The people that we meet online are not virtual. They are real communities populated with real people, which is why so many end up meeting in the flesh"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 15).

"Using the Internet is a culturally located experience" (Hine, 2005, p. 9).

"Netnographers grant great significance to the fact that people turn to computer networks to partake in sources of culture and to gain a sense of community"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 7).

"Community and culture can inhere in many of the familiar forums and 'places' of the internet"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 7).

1.2   Virtual Communities
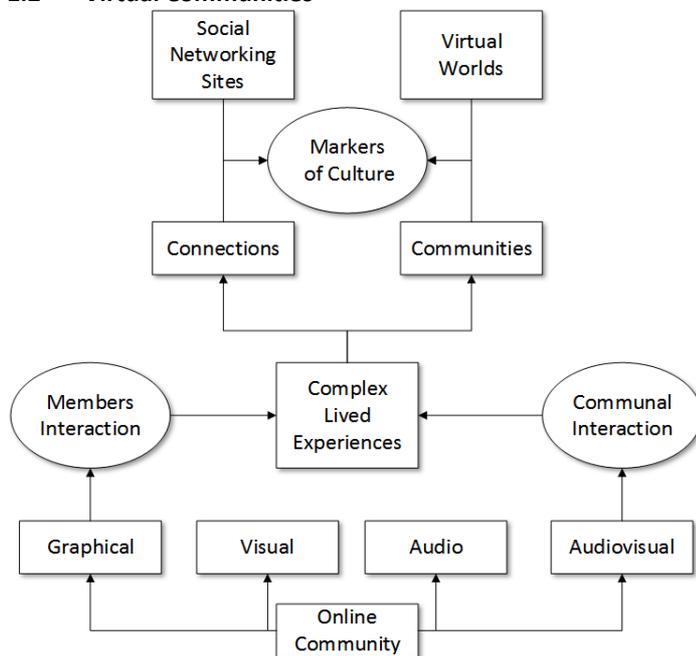
"Social networking sites and virtual worlds carry the complex markers of many cultures and both manifest and forge new connections and communities. Newsgroups and bulletin boards, as well as chat-rooms, although 'old-style' communities, may never go out of style completely"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 7).

"Understanding how members interact with the culture in general can pay off richly in understanding the complex lived experience of communal interaction"(Kozinets, 2010, p. p.133).

"Netnographic data analysis must include the graphical, visual, audio, and audiovisual aspects of online community data"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 133).

2   Common Interactions
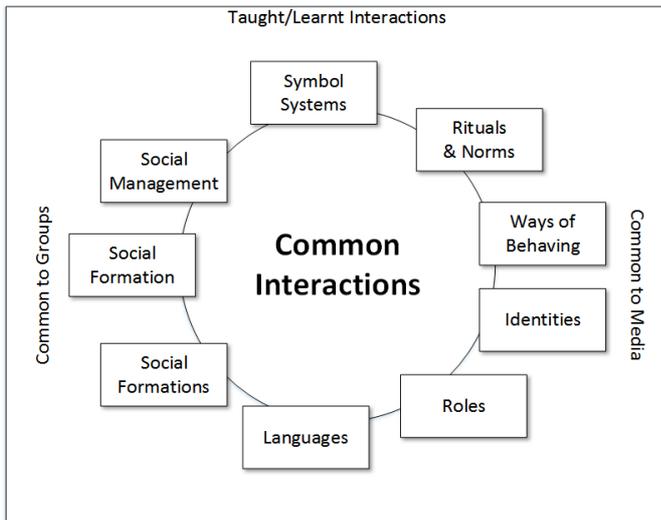
"Netnography examines the individual interactions resulting from Internet connections or through computer-mediated communications as a focal source of data"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 8).

"Are the symbol systems, rituals and norms, ways of behaving, identities, roles and, in particular languages, that help particular online social formations to organise and manage themselves? Are these linguistic systems, norms, actions and identities distinctive to online groups, and online communications? Are they taught? Are they common to some groups and not to others? Are they common to some media and not to others"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 12).

"Netnography is a specialised type of ethnography. It uses and incorporates different methods in a single approach focused on the study of communities and cultures in the Internet age. Qualitative online research such as netnography is 'essential in shaping our understanding of the Internet, its impact on culture, and culture's impacts on the Internet"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 157).

Recap:
- ✓ Online communities should be afforded the same status as offline communities.
- ✓ Netnographers seek out places of online community.
- ✓ Social networking sites carry markers of culture that netnographers can map.
- ✓ There are common elements to our online interactions.
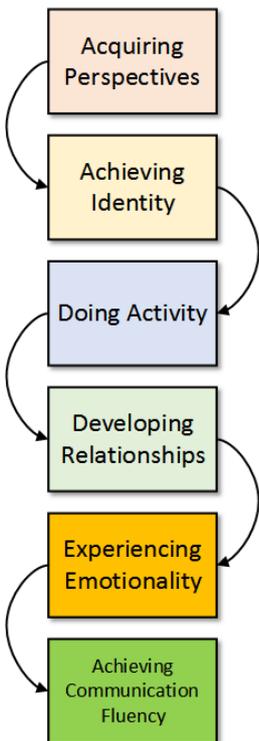
3   Generic Social Processes
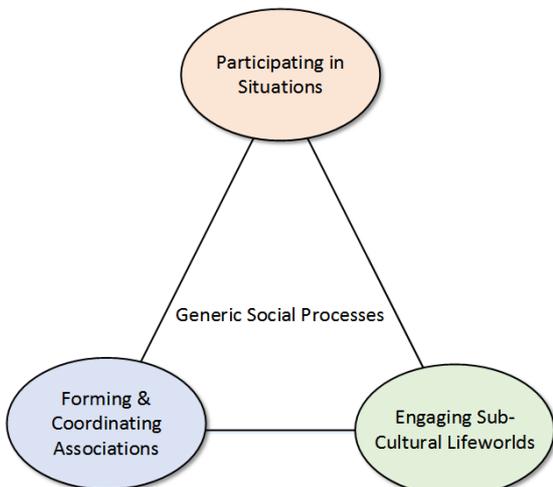
"This overview of generic social processes is organised around three very broad concepts:
(a) participating in situations,
(b) engaging subcultural life-worlds, and
(c) forming and coordinating associations.

These three themes should not be seen as stages or sequences but, instead, represent interrelated sets of processes that people implement on more or less simultaneous basis as they do things in the community" (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 142).

3.1 Generic Social Processes

"People in all manner of associations find themselves coming to terms with a relatively generic set of processes. These include the matters of:

(1) acquiring perspectives;
(2) achieving identity;
(3) doing activity (performing activities, influencing others, making commitments);
(4) developing relationships;
(5) experiencing emotionality; and
(6) achieving communicative fluency.

We may expect that people participating in any setting may be differentially attentive to these dimensions of association on both an overall, collective basis and over time. However, by attending to each of these sub-processes, researchers may more completely approximate the multiplistic features of particular roles (and relationships) that the participants in those settings experience" (Prus, 1999, p. 144).

3.2 Generic Social Processes
"The interactionist, generally, concentrate on the ways in which people manage or deal with particular aspects of their life-worlds. While this agenda is still rather encompassing, the underlying attentiveness to the ongoing accomplishment of human activity represents the essential core for approaching the study of the human condition" (Prus, 1999, p. 140).

"The task before us, therefore, involves
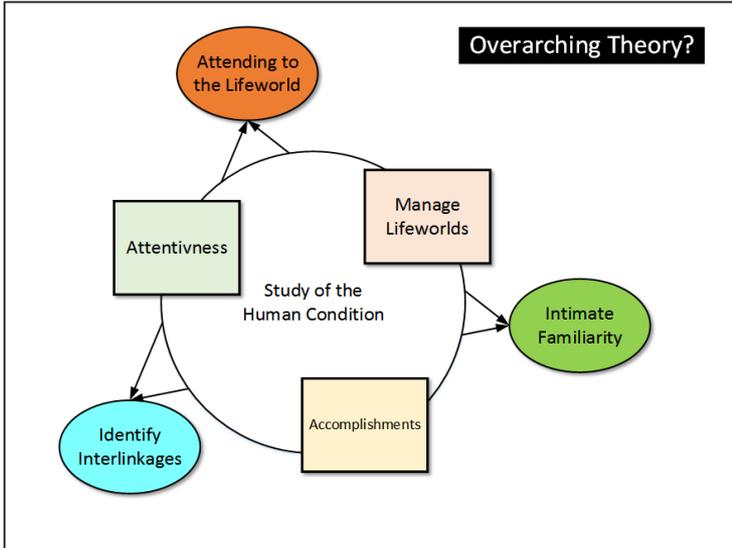
(a) attending to the various life worlds or subcultural realms that *the participants* distinguish and

(b) establishing intimate familiarity with those participating in these life-worlds so that we might be better able to acknowledge and identify the situated and emergent interlinkages, disjunctures, and irrelevancies that people experience in the course of conducting their affairs.

Minimally, this requires that social scientists suspend the pursuit for cultural holisms or overarching rationalities, or at least approach these with exceedingly great caution, even in what may seem the most simplistic of human communities" (Prus, 1999, p. 136).

3.3   Participation Settings
"Hence, even when analysts focus on people's participation in specific settings, it is important that analysts be mindful of these overlapping life-worlds and the ways in which people manage their multiple realms of involvement" (Prus, 1999, p. 143).

Recap:
- ✓ We are seeking interrelated sets of processes.
- ✓ People in different situations encounter generic processes.
- ✓ What do people do, what do they accomplish is the question?
- ✓ How do we attend to peoples life worlds?
- ✓ How do these life worlds overlap and how do we draw disticntions?

4   Grounding in Fieldwork
Cultural knowledge must be grounded in detailed field knowledge of that culture, and in the data that fieldwork creates"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 166).
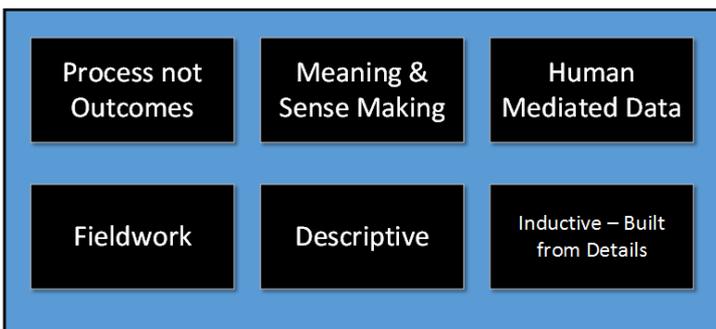
4.1 Gathering Data:

1. "Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, rather than outcomes or products.
2. Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning – how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world.
3. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through the human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines.
4. Qualitative research involves fieldwork. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site, or institution to observe or record behaviour in its natural setting
5. Qualitative research is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words and pictures.
6. The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details" (Creswell 1994 p.145).

4.2 Reporting and assessing social media usages:
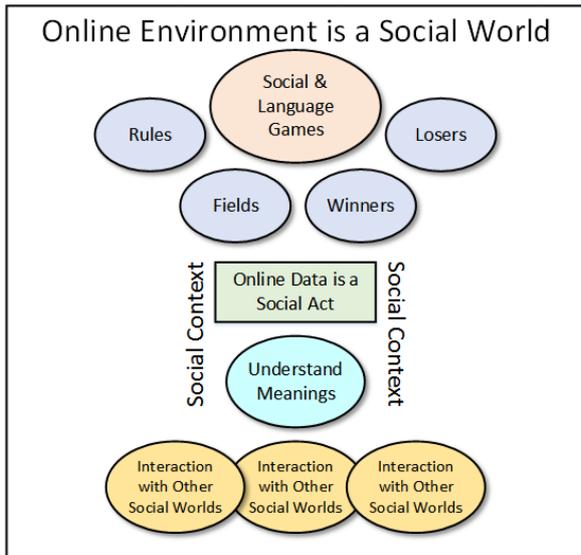
- The idea behind this approach to data analysis is straightforward:
- Consider the online environment a social world.
- Assume that outline environments have social and language games, with attendant rules, fields, winners, and losers.
- Treat online data as a social act.
- Seek to understand the meaning of these acts in the context of the appropriate social worlds.
- When appropriate, broaden the particular online social world to interact with other online social worlds as well as other social worlds that are not exclusively online, or not online at all".

"Archival data… elicited data… fieldnote data"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 98).

4.3 Computer Aided Research:
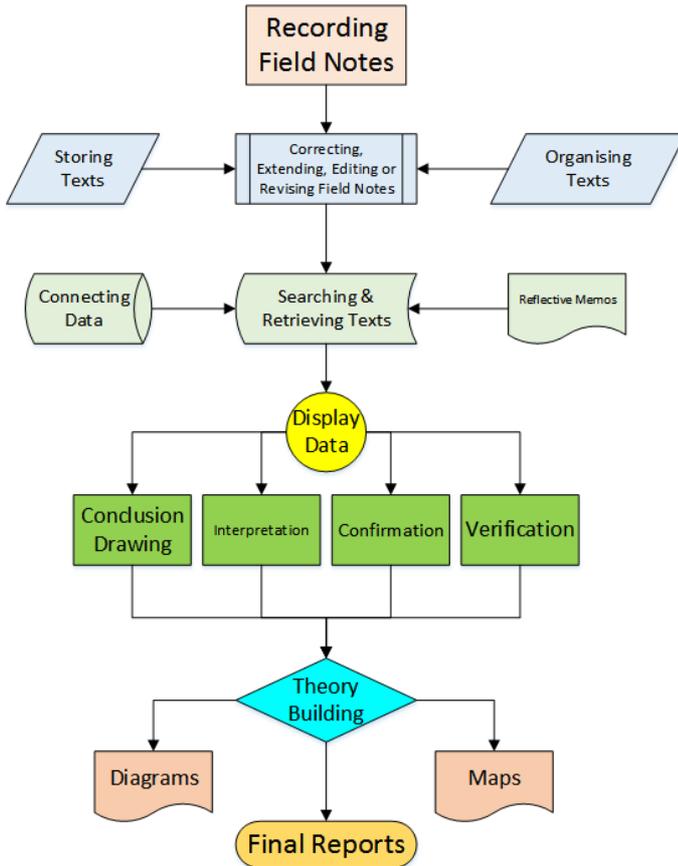
"Psychologist Eben Weitzman and Matthew Miles (1995, p.5) suggest the following uses of computer software in qualitative research projects:

- recording fieldnotes
- correcting, extending, editing, or revising fieldnotes
- storing texts
- organising texts
- searching and retrieving texts and making them available for inspection
- connecting relevant data segments to each other, forming categories, clusters, or networks
- writing reflective commentaries or 'memos' on the data as a basis for deeper analysis
- performing content analysis by counting frequencies, sequences, or locations of words and phrases
- displaying selected data in a reduced, condensed, organised forms, such as in a matrix
- aiding in conclusion-drawing, interpretation, confirmation and verification
- building theory by developing systematic, conceptually coherent explanations of findings
- creating diagrams or graphical maps that depict findings or theories
- preparing interim and final reports" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 128).

"Individual actors come into the view of sociological study in terms of being members or partners in a network of interdependence. Given that, regardless of what we do, we are dependent on others, the central questions of sociology, we could say, are: how do the types of social relations and societies that we inhabit relate to how we see each other, ourselves and our knowledge, actions and their consequences" (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 5).

5 Connection with People
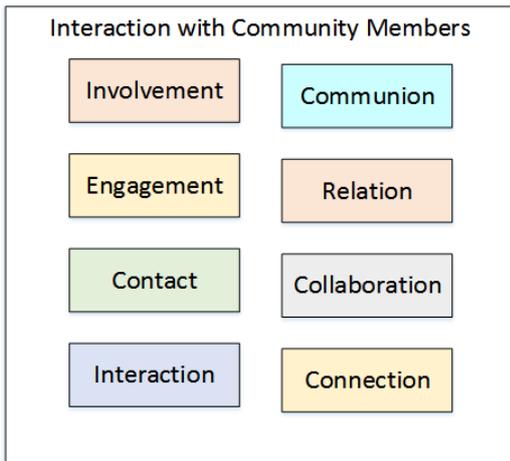
"Data collection in netnography means communicating with members of a culture or community. That involvement, engagement, contact, interaction, communion, relation, collaboration and connection with community members – not with a website, server, or a keyboard, but with the people on the other end"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 95).

6 Organisation

"The better you can get at organising data as you collect them, the more methodical and systematic about data collection that you can become, then the better a netnographer you will be" (Kozinets, 2010).
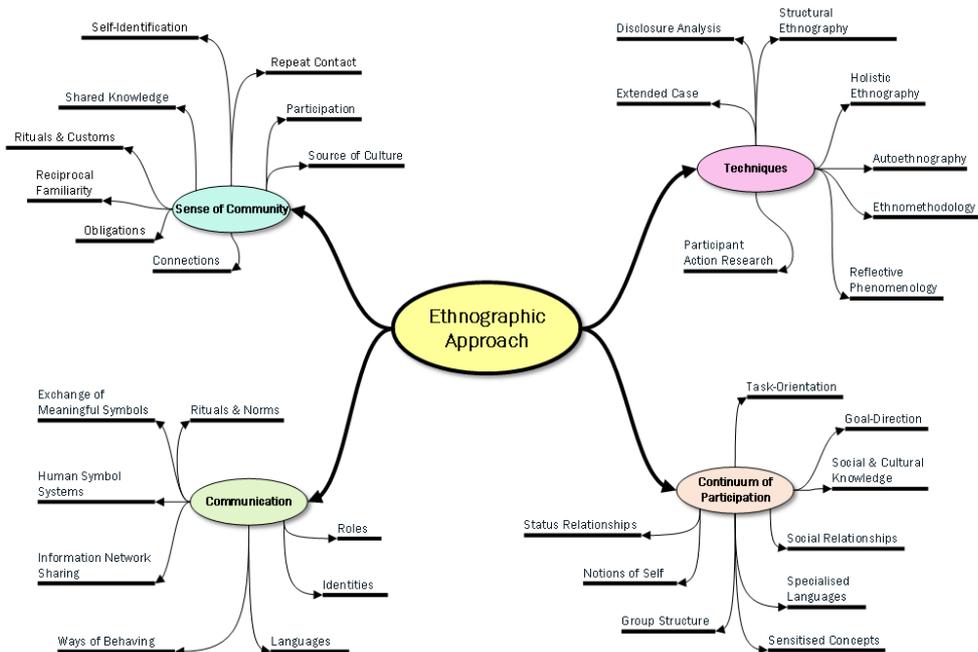
Kozinets, R.V. (2010) Netnography – Doing Ethnographic Research Online; Sage, London

Recap:
- ✓ Fieldwork is the primary method for collecting data.
- ✓ The online world is a social world and online data can be treated as a social act.
- ✓ There are standard data collection techniques.
- ✓ We must talk with members of the communities we study.

7 Online-Offline Relationships

"In a netnography, focus groups of existing community participants might be valuable for two main reasons. First, online community and culture members can be group interviewed – just as individuals can be interviewed singly. They can be used to learn about norms, conventions, histories, and roles of online community members as they interact online"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 49).

"Secondly, they can be interviewed to understand how online and offline activities are related. Questions to the focus group can extend and broaden our understanding of the interrelation of other social groups and activities on what we observer in the online community and culture"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 49).

7.1 Interviewing

"Conducting an interview through your computer means that your communications are going to be shaped by the medium you use. Studies seeking to understand the subjective impact of Internet connectivity can also collect documents from research participants. These documents often take the form of diaries or journals in which participants record day-to-day or even hour-by-hour events, reflections, or impressions of experiences" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 46).
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7.2 Participation

"Removing the participative role of ethnographer from netnography also removes the opportunity to experience embedded cultural understanding. Without this profound knowledge and experience of the cultural context, the interpretation is impaired"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 75).

"Netnographies are appropriate for gathering more than personal perspectives or meaning's. They are also useful for analysis of many of the cultural aspects of online social phenomena. For instance, a netnography can be reveal a wide variety of social processes, such as how informational and social communications and connections are made. It can reveal hierarchical or 'flat' cultural arrangements and styles, and discuss how they are perpetuated and how they change. It can analyse how systems of meaning alter, are shared between different communities and cultures, are borne by participants, and are enacted through rituals and other behaviours"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 80).

7.3 Reflection

"In reflective field notes, netnographers record their own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions and personal emotions occurring during their time online, and relating to their online experiences. Through these written reflections, the netnographer records her journey from outsider to insider, her learning of languages, rituals, and practices, as well as her involvement in a social web of meanings and personalities. These fieldnotes often provide key insights into what the online culture is and what it does"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 114).

7.4 Ethnographic Process

"Coding… Noting… Abstracting and Comparing… Checking and Refinement… Generalising… Theorising"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 119).

Recap:
- ✓ Seek out the interrelationships between people.
- ✓ Track events and occurrences as they happen.
- ✓ Participate – there is no better way to understand.
- ✓ Reflect on the process of collecting data while participating.
- ✓ Follow the process.

8 Summary

"Online communities *are* communities; there is no room for debate about this topic anymore. They teach us about real languages, real meanings, real causes, real cultures"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 15).

"In our quest to find the 'difference that makes the difference', how do the practices of these branches of study differ from each other?" (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 4).

8.1 Critical Questions

"The ethnographic and, by extension, netnographic enterprise is about struggling to transcend our own illusory categories and to understand the categories of the community and culture we are focussing upon"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 168).

"Reflexivity is thus the extent to which the netnographic text acknowledges the role of the researcher and is open to alternative interpretations"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 169).

"Our understanding of online communities and cultures will be greatly increased as we begin to probe the different social and expressive uses of the multifaceted online communications media"(Kozinets, 2010, p. 177).

References:
Bauman, Z., & May, T. (2001). *Thinking Sociologically* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
Hine, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Virtual Methods - Issues in social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg.
Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography - Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. London: Sage.