

Netnography *Simplified.*

A Guide to Tracking Consumers' Online Behavior

BY JULIA LEE-KIM, *Student Member*

Anon1," an avid fan of the television show *Lost*, notices that the "others" on the show do not have watches or children. She logs onto a *Lost* forum and mentions her observations. Her post generates threads that span a range of topics, from theories on who the "others" are to postulations on immortality as presented in movies like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Tuck Everlasting*. After reading and responding to posts in this thread, Adam, who lives in Australia, rents these adventure movies. Soon, rentals of both movies spike all across the board. Could there be a connection? This scenario illustrates the marketing and advertising insights that online forums provide.

Netnography is a research method developed by Robert Kozinets in the mid-1990s. Technical communicators who are responsible for marketing can use netnography to analyze the interactions and behaviors of online communities. Each day, individuals connect to others through boards, blogs, wikis, Web pages, listservs, multi-user dungeons (MUDs), and chatrooms. These active participants in online communities provide an abundance of valuable cultural information. The trained eye, using netnography, can see patterns in consumption.

As a technical communicator, you may use the Internet's rich reservoir of information to help predict trends in *product segmentation*—the categorization of a product's satisfaction potential in terms of consumers' experiential aspirations. This type of analysis, in turn, helps identify where to spend advertis-

How Do I Find the Appropriate Online Forums?

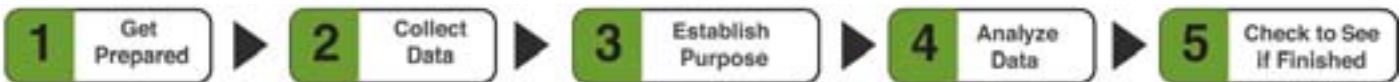
To begin finding the appropriate online forums, you can search for keywords in search engines such as Google and Yahoo!, and follow relevant homepages and links. You may also lurk around online communities, wandering into particular forums (also known as online eavesdropping). As you visit these forums, you will be able to choose the best one for you by identifying where participants discuss the topics of your guiding questions, searching for higher traffic postings, identifying which forums contain the largest numbers of discrete message postings, seeking data with rich detail and description, and identifying where there are more intermember interactions.

Five types of online forums will help you find in-depth data.

tion patterns for technology-based products. Examples include *boards1.wizards.com* and *www.avalon-rpg.com*.

- *Chatrooms.* These are online sites in which people can communicate in real time. There are two types: (1) those that allow participants to chat with multiple people, such as the chatrooms made popular by AOL; and (2) the one-to-one communication tools of instant messaging, such as MSN, Jabber, and ICQ. Chatrooms are characterized by social exchange in which offline topics such as participants' personal lives are sometimes discussed.
- *Independent Web pages, Web rings, and blogs.* These sites require thematically linked Web pages and an understanding of the author's audience. Generally the authors create timely and well-connected pages, and often reveal their identities in order to max-

Figure 1. Completing a netnography research project is a five-step process.



ing money. Every netnographic study is unique, depending upon the particular interests of the communities and the research objectives. This article offers you a simplified guide to netnography, as described in Figure 1. My intent is to convince you of the benefits of using netnography and to give you a solid base to begin the process.

Step 1. Getting Prepared

How Do I Choose My Guiding Questions?

What is your intention in conducting consumption-based research? Do you want to find out if members of the *Lost* forum discuss products offline? Do you want to find out if they provide product insights by discussing features and functions of products? Or would you like to find out if the members' willingness to discuss certain types of products indicates product segmentation? To begin a netnographic study, start with a list of guiding questions. They will help you focus on the type of information you need to gather.

- *Boards, consisting of newsgroups, user-groups, and Usenet groups.* These tend to be organized by product, service, and lifestyle. Many boards contain 100,000 or more readers. Identities may be anonymous and may transcend time, since commentary on postings may be made at any time according to user interest. Two examples of boards are *www.ghacks.net* and *www.digitalconsciousness.net*.
- *Lists or listservs.* A listserv comprises people who receive simultaneous postings to all members of the listserv group. Because this e-mail listing is based on a common topic (such as art, diet, music genre, or hobby), it is often an easy place to begin research. Examples include *www.yahoogroups.com* and *www.liszt.com*.
- *MUDs.* In these "multi-user dungeons," individuals interact in real time with each other and with objects, creating an extension of real life in the virtual world. This form of structured recreation provides consump-

imize views of their "expert" opinions and information. Examples are *www.epinions.com* and *www.blogger.com*.

How Do I Test the Waters?

After choosing the appropriate forum or forums, join and mingle. Familiarize yourself with the characteristics of the group and its behaviors, interests, and ways of communicating (such as abbreviations like "lol" for *laughing out loud*). Begin to note particular insights; these are your field notes. Copy memorable or particularly telling quotations. Download exchanges—both text and images if applicable.

Note: After joining a community, you may realize that it does not give you the detail-rich data you were hoping for. In such cases, move on to another forum. Although you may have taken field notes for a forum you will not be using, your note-collecting efforts were not wasted. Searching for a forum is a process that helps you gain insights into the characteristics of that type of community.

Step 2. Collecting Data

When collecting data, consider the different types available and the time frame in which you should complete your collection process.

What Kinds of Data Do I Collect?

You could collect two different types of data: direct transcriptions from the community that you choose, and field notes on your observations of member interactions. According to Kozinets, you should be aware of the following interaction elements:

- *Subtext: unspoken or implied communication.* Sarcasm is an example.
- *Pretext: potential agendas.* For example, perhaps a member of the *Lost* forum recommends Netflix for renting DVDs. Is this member being helpful, or is he or she affiliated with the company?
- *Contingencies: links among items of forum content.* The ability to find patterns of association, such as comments about movies and sales increases, is the heart of consumer-based research.
- *Conditions: topics that are dependent on something else.* For example, comments on movies might be generated only when individuals attempt to explain plot motivations as compared with other movies.
- *Personal emotions: your own thoughts and gut feelings regarding the research.* You might, for example, notice that “Anon1” was generally helpful to you when you entered the forum. You feel that this individual is a helpful, friendly member. Taking note of how you feel may lead to a possible contact for future follow-up interviews. Note: Jot down specific quotes directly relevant to your guiding questions and hypothesis. You can use them when you report your findings.

How Long Do I Collect Data?

If you are under time constraints, you should dedicate four to five days

Figure 2. Community members make the progression from tourist to insider in an online community.



The minute you sound like a researcher, you will lose potential opportunities.

outside of Step 1, the preparation stage. Remember, however, that you can collect data as long as new insights on important topics are revealed. An epiphany can occur at any time.

Step 3. Making Your Purpose Known

Making your presence known is a necessary and ethical way for you to elicit further information from community members.

How Do I State My Research Aim?

Now that you are sure that the forum you have focused on and joined as a tourist or mingler can give you rich, detailed data, you should let the members know why you are there and assure them of their anonymity in your study. At this point, you may want to ask for

further assistance from forum members. You could ask them to participate in cyber interviews, surveys, and e-mail follow-ups.

Note: Communicating in a friendly and nonthreatening tone is key to eliciting more information from members. The minute you sound like a researcher—and not “one of us”—you will lose potential opportunities.

Why Do I Have to Make My Purpose Known?

A user’s general progression is to begin as a tourist and then progress into being a mingler, devotee, or insider. You will naturally go through this progression in order to determine the appropriateness of a forum and its data. Although netnography requires the covert phase of lurking to gain knowledge of a community, staying under cover raises ethical problems. Making your presence and purpose known is especially critical if you want to conduct cyber interviews with e-mail follow-ups in order to gain deeper knowledge of the community.

Step 4. Analyzing the Data

You can analyze your data in many different ways. How you categorize your data will shape your interpretations of it. Categorizing should be a logical process that provides relevant insights into your research.

Other netnographers have found these ways of categorizing data to be particularly useful:

Ask whether the data is—

- *On-topic* or *off-topic* in relation to your guiding question
- A *social* or *informational* exchange within the forum

Note: spend your most intense analyzing efforts on the on-topic and informational data.

Identify the four types of community members:

- *Tourists* are socially superficial; they are in the forum to get information.
- *Minglers* are socially active but only somewhat interested in the forum’s information.

- *Devotees* are somewhat social; they are loyal to consumption, but not too committed to the community. They can be involved in several groups on the same topic.
- *Insiders* are both socially active and have strong interest in the community. They have the most influence and can affect the consumption loyalty of other members. Note: as described in Figure 2, to become an insider, the online community member will begin as a tourist.

Note: The 80/20 rule applies to community members; 20 percent of the members will contribute 80 percent of the interaction. This means devotees and insiders are key members. They not only offer the most relevant data regarding the forum, but because they are respected, they can turn or “upgrade” tourists and minglers into devotees and insiders.

Count the frequency of these items:

- *Messages* that are posted in the forum
- *Threads* that were posted in answer to the original message
- *Types* of community members
- *Days* you studied the community

Note: Counting these types of items gives you quantifiable information. Such quantification is convincing when providing your insights to the “powers that be.”

Compare the frequency and types of information, such as the following:

- *Positive and negative comments.* For example, Adam mentions he rented *Indiana Jones* from an online DVD rental site for the first time and had a wonderful experience. Meanwhile, “JAN9” had terrible customer service on two occasions. You may want to note these comments and see whether they have an effect on other members’ comments.
- *Informational or social comments.* For example, informational comments include plot discussions on the *Lost* forum. Social comments include greetings and questions about a member’s job.

Note: Be open to the subtle implications



Staying under cover raises ethical problems.

of the data collected. You may find other useful insights that may be revolutionary.

Finally, rank the data in order of its importance or relevance to your guiding question.

Step 5. Checking to See That You Are Finished

You will probably sense when you are finished, but to make sure, here are some indicators.

Am I Ready to Wrap Up?

One indication that you are done is that your time frame—four to five days, for example—is over. Here are some more substantive benchmarks that indicate that you are at the end of your netnographic research:

- You are confident in the data and findings collected.
- You believe in the findings and are able to account for them.
- You are able to answer your original guiding questions.

Note: You have also noted other patterns observed. These notes could come in handy later when you need to continue marketing your project.

If the statements above are true, you are ready to start using your marketing insights.

Using Marketing Insights

Netnography provides a telescopic view into the cultural phenomenon of the Internet. As a technical communicator involved in marketing endeavors, you can observe, identify, and dissect subtle consumer dynamics manifested in Internet forums. By using these five steps as a guide to tracking consumers’ online behavior, you are well on your way toward using the marketing insights that netnography provides. **1**

SUGGESTED READINGS

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