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The author develops “netnography” as an online marketing research technique for providing consumer insight. “Netnography” is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. As a method, “netnography” is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography, and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews. It provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups. The author provides guidelines that acknowledge the online environment, respect the inherent flexibility and openness of ethnography, and provide rigor and ethics in the conduct of marketing research. As an illustrative example, the author provides a netnography of an online coffee newsgroup and discusses its marketing implications.

The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography For Marketing Research in Online Communities

*Consumers making product and brand choices are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication for information on which to base their decisions.² Besides perusing advertising and corporate web-sites, consumers are using newsgroups, chat rooms, e-mail list servers, personal World Wide Web-pages and other online formats to share ideals, build communities, and contact fellow

consumers who are seen as more objective information sources. Although they are popularly called “virtual communities” (Rheingold 1993), the term “virtual” might misleadingly imply that these communities are less “real” than physical communities (Jones 1995). Yet as Kozinets (1998, p. 366) pointed out, “these social groups have a ‘real’ existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior” (see also Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). To maintain the useful distinction of computer-mediated social gathering, we therefore use the term “online communities” to refer to these Internet-based forums.

Motion pictures, sports, music, automobiles, fast food, toys, consumer electronics, computers and peripherals, software, cigars, beer, coffee and many other products and services are discussed in online communities whose importance is being increasingly recognized by contemporary marketers (see, e.g., Armstrong and Hagel 1996, Bulik 2000, Hagel and Armstrong 1997, Kozinets 1999, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, White 1999). In the last few years,

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² For example, surveys on adults who use online services indicate that 36% of them access newsgroups and 25% visit chat rooms (Visgaitis 1996) and these numbers appear to be growing (Jones 1999). Reid’s (1995) analysis of Arbitron data provides a much higher figure of 71.6% of all Internet users assessing newsgroups.

marketing firms such as Cyveillance, eWatch, NetCurrents and GenuOne and consumer services such as Epinions.com, PlanetFeedback, Bizrate.com and eComplaints.com have been formed to take advantage of opportunities posed by cross-consumer electronic communication.

The reason behind this marketing interest is twofold. First, marketers recognize the increasing importance of the Internet and of consumers that are active in online communities. Almquist and Roberts (2000, p. 18) found that the major factor influencing positive brand equity for one brand over another is consumer advocacy. Online communities are places in which consumers often partake in discussions whose goals include attempts to inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brands (Kozinets 1999, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Secondly, one of the major purposes of marketing research is to identify and understand the tastes, desires, relevant symbol-systems and decision-making influences of particular consumers and consumer groups. As the advent of networked computing is opening new opportunities for market-oriented consumer interaction, it is also opening up opportunities for marketing researchers to study the tastes, desires and other needs of consumers interacting in online communities.

Marketing researchers use a variety of methods to study consumers. Qualitative methods are particularly useful for revealing the rich symbolic world that underlies needs, desires, meanings and choice (see, e.g., Levy 1959). Currently, the most popular qualitative methods are focus groups, personal interviews, and "market-oriented ethnography" (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). While market-oriented ethnography is an important technique that focuses on the behavior of the people who constitute a market for a product or service, it is a time-consuming and elaborate method that requires considerable skill and substantial investments

of researcher resources. Because it involves in-person researcher participant-observation, market-oriented ethnography is also an intentionally and unavoidably intrusive method that precludes unobtrusive observation of naturally situated consumer behavior. Compared to ethnography, face-to-face focus groups (Calder 1977) and personal interviews (Thompson 1997) are less time-consuming, simpler, and more popular qualitative marketing research techniques. However, their obtrusiveness, artificiality and decontextualization of cultural marketing information are considerably greater than that of ethnography.

This article extends the strengths of market-oriented ethnography by demonstrating how it can be efficaciously conducted online using existing online communities, often in an unobtrusive context. The novel, computer-mediated, textual, nonphysical, social-cue-impoverished context of online community may have hampered its rigorous investigation by researchers. Over the past several years, many anthropologists, sociologists and qualitative marketing researchers have written about the need to specially adapt existing ethnographic research techniques to the many cultures and communities that are emerging through online communications (see, e.g., Escobar 1994; Grossnickle and Raskin 2000; Hakken 1999; Jones 1999; Kozinets 1999; Miller and Slater 2000). Although it does not break entirely new ground methodologically, this paper addresses this important need by providing researchers with a rigorous methodology adapted to the unique characteristics of online communities.

"Netnography," or ethnography on the Internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications. As a marketing research technique, "netnography" uses the information publicly available in

online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups. Compared to traditional and market-oriented ethnography, “netnography” is far less-time consuming and elaborate. Another contrast with traditional and market-oriented ethnography is that “netnography” is capable of being conducted in a manner that is entirely unobtrusive (although it optionally need not be). Compared to focus groups and personal interviews, “netnography” is far less obtrusive, conducted using observations of consumers in a context that is not fabricated by the marketing researcher. It also can provide information in a manner that is less costly and more timely than focus groups and personal interviews. “Netnography” provides marketing researchers with a window into naturally occurring behaviors, such as searches for information by, and communal word-of-mouth discussions between, consumers. Because it is both naturalistic and unobtrusive—an unprecedentedly unique combination not found in any other marketing research method—“netnography” allows continuing access to informants in a particular online social situation. This access may provide important opportunities for consumer-researcher and consumer-marketer relationships. The limitations of “netnography” draw from its more narrow focus on online communities, the need for researcher interpretive skill, and the lack of informant identifiers present in the online context that leads to difficulty generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample. Marketing researchers wishing to generalize the findings of a “netnography” of a particular online group to other groups must therefore apply careful evaluations of similarity and employ multiple methods for triangulation.

In this article’s first section the method of “netnography” is explained, with particular attention paid to its relative strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis in-person

qualitative techniques. The second section provides an illustrative example that uses the information on a popular coffee newsgroup to gather consumer insights that may inform marketing practice.

THE METHOD OF NETNOGRAPHY

Ethnography and Netnography

Ethnography is an anthropological method that has gained popularity in sociology, cultural studies, consumer research and a variety of other social scientific fields. The term refers both to fieldwork, or the study of the distinctive meanings, practices and artifacts of particular social groups, and to the representations based on such a study. Ethnography is an inherently open-ended practice. It is based upon participation and observation in particular cultural arenas as well as acknowledgment and employment of researcher reflexivity. That is, it relies heavily on “the acuity of the researcher-as-instrument” (Sherry 1991, p. 572) and is more visibly affected by researcher interests and skills than most other types of research. Ethnography also uses metaphorical, hermeneutic and analytic interpretation of data (see, e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Spiggle 1994, Thompson 1997). Ethnography is grounded in knowledge of the local, the particularistic, and the specific. While it is often used to generalize, it is most often used to gain a type of particularized understanding that has come to be termed “grounded knowledge” (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The rich qualitative content of ethnography’s findings as well as the open-endedness that makes it adaptable to a variety of circumstances has led to its popularity as a method. This flexibility has allowed ethnography to be used for over a century to represent and understand the behaviors of people belonging to almost every race, nationality, religion, culture and age group—and even those of some non-human species groupings. Even with this impressive body of

ethnographic work behind it, however, it can be said that no two ethnographies have ever been conducted in exactly the same manner. This flexibility is one of ethnography's greatest strengths. Ethnographic methods have been continually refashioned to suit particular fields of scholarship, research questions, research sites, times, researcher preferences and cultural groups.

While it is inherently an open-ended form of inquiry, ethnographers choose from related field procedures and often confront similar methodological issues. Common ethnographic procedures that help shape researchers' participant-observation include: (1) making cultural entrée, (2) gathering and analyzing data, (3) ensuring trustworthy interpretation, (5) conducting ethical research, and (6) providing opportunities for culture member feedback. Thorough accounts of these procedures exist for ethnographies conducted in face-to-face situations (see, e.g., Fetterman 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Jorgensen 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985). However, networked computing is a novel medium for social exchange between consumers that changes the particulars of each of these research procedures, concomitantly allowing an unprecedentedly new level of access to the heretofore unobservable behaviors of interacting consumers. It is important, therefore, to provide a general description of the steps and procedures involved in conducting "netnography" as they are adapted to these unique online contingencies. While "netnography," like ethnography, is inherently flexible and adaptable to the interests and skill-set of the individual marketing researcher, these steps may act as a guide to researchers interested in rigorously applying the method to their own research. This combination of more rigorous online guidelines combined with an innate flexibility is novel, yet still faithful to scholarly depictions of traditional ethnographic methodology (e.g., Fetterman 1989; Glaser

and Strauss 1967; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Jorgensen 1989; Lincoln and Guba). After discussing these "netnographic" procedures, we will proceed to illustrate the richness of the technique with a short example of marketing research conducted in an online group devoted to the discussion of coffee.

Entrée. There are two initial steps that market researchers will find useful as preparation for conducting a "netnography." First, researchers must have specific marketing research questions and then identify particular online forums appropriate to the types of questions that are of interest to them. Secondly, they must learn as much as possible about the forums, the groups, and the individual participants they seek to understand. Distinct from traditional ethnographies, in the identification of relevant communities online search engines will prove invaluable.

Structurally, at least five different types of online community can be distinguished that may be useful to the conduct of market-oriented "netnography" (see Kozinets 1999 for more detail). First are boards, which function as electronic bulletin boards (also called newsgroups, usegroups, or usenet groups). These are often organized around particular products, services or lifestyles, each of which may have important uses and implications for marketing researchers interested in particular consumer topics (e.g., McDonalds, Sony Playstation, beer, travel to Europe, skiing). Many consumer-oriented newsgroups have over 100,000 readers, and some have over one million (Reid 1995). Currently, google.com has an excellent newsgroup search engine (acquired from deja.com).

Second are independent web-pages as well as web-rings composed of thematically-linked World Wide Web pages. Web-pages such as epinions (www.epinions.com) provide online community resources for consumer-to-consumer exchanges. Yahoo!'s consumer advocacy listings also provide useful listing

of independent consumer web-pages. Yahoo! also has an excellent directory of web-rings (www.dir.webring.yahoo.com). Third are lists (also called listservs, after the software program), which are e-mail mailing lists united by common themes (e.g., art, diet, music, professions, toys, educational services, hobbies). Some good search engines of lists are egroups.com and liszt.com.

Finally, multi-user dungeons and chat rooms tend to be considerably less market-oriented in their focus, containing information that is often fantasy-oriented, social, sexual and relational in nature. General search engines (e.g., Yahoo! or excite) provide good directories of these communities. Dungeons and chat rooms may still be of interest to marketing researchers (see, e.g., White 1999) because of their ability to provide insight into particular themes (e.g., certain industry, demographic or lifestyle segments). However, many marketing researchers will find the generally more focused and more information-laden content provided by the members of boards, rings and lists to be more useful to their investigation than the more social information present in dungeons and chat rooms. In general, combining search engines (e.g., a WWW search engine such as Yahoo! with a newsgroup search engine such as groups.google.com) will often provide the best results for locating specific topics of interest. It is also important to note that a broad and thorough computerized search may be required, as the topic of interest may be categorized at varying levels of abstraction, for example, at the brand, product category, or activity type level.

Once suitable online communities have been identified, the researcher can judge among them using criteria specifically suitable to the investigation. Generally, online communities should be preferred that have either (1) a more focused and research question relevant segment, topic or group, (2) higher “traffic” of postings, (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters, (4) more

detailed or descriptively rich data, and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. These evaluations entail an important adaptation of ethnography to the online context, and their use distinguishes the method of “netnography” from traditional ethnography. All of the online forums (groups, rings, lists, dungeons and rooms) may provide useful access to people self-segmented by a certain type of lifestyle or market-orientation, which researchers may, at their option, translate into private (‘one-on-one’) online, real-time interviews (see, e.g., Hamman 1996). Before initiating contact or data collection, the characteristics (group membership, market-oriented behaviors, interests, and language) of the online communities should be familiar to the marketing researcher.

Data Collection and Analysis. With online communities chosen, the marketing researcher is ready to begin collecting data for his/her “netnography.” There are at least two important elements to this data collection: (1) the data that the researcher directly copies from the computer-mediated communications of online community members, and (2) the data that the researcher inscribes regarding his/her observations of the community, its members, interactions and meanings. As a distinct advantage from traditional ethnographers, “netnographers” benefit from the nearly automatic transcription of downloaded documents. With the addition of vastly lower search costs than face-to-face ethnography (particularly in purely observational forms of “netnography”), data is often plentiful and easy to obtain. In this environment, the “netnographer’s” choices of which data to save and which to pursue are important, and should be guided by the research question and available resources (e.g., number of online members willing to be interviewed, ability of online members to express themselves, time, researcher skill). Dealing judiciously with instantaneous information overload is a much more

important problem for “netnographers” than for traditional ethnographers.

Because the online medium is famous (and infamous) for its casual social elements, messages may be classified first as primarily social or primarily informational, and also as primarily on-topic or primarily off-topic (where the topic is the research question of interest). While including all the data in a first pass or “grand tour” interpretation, researchers will generally want to save their most intense analytical efforts for the primarily informational and primarily on-topic messages.

The posters of online messages may also be categorized. Some novel categories for classifying them based on their level of involvement with the online community and the consumption activity have been outlined by Kozinets (1999). “Tourists” lack strong social ties and deep interest in the activity (they often post casual questions). “Minglers” have strong social ties but minimal interest in the consumption activity. “Devotees” have strong consumption interests, but few attachments to the online group. Finally, “insiders” have strong ties to the online group and to the consumption activity, and tend to be long-standing and frequently referenced members. For marketing research useful for marketing strategy formulation, the devotees and the insiders represent the most important data sources. Preliminary research reveals that devoted, enthusiastic, actively involved, and sophisticated user segments are represented in online communities by insiders and devotees (Kozinets 1999). It is also useful to note that online communities themselves tend to propagate the development of loyalty and (sometimes) heavy usage by socially reinforcing consumption. Hence, marketing researchers interested in online word-of-mouth and influence may find it useful to track how tourists and minglers are socialized and “upgraded” to insiders and devotees in market-oriented online communities (*ibid*).

As with grounded theory (Glaser and

Struass 1967), data collection should continue as long as new insights on important topical areas are still being generated. For purposes of precision, some “netnographers” may wish to keep close count of the exact number of messages and web-pages read (in practice, an extremely difficult measurement), as well as how many distinct participants were involved. The strength of “netnography” is its particularistic ties to specific online consumer groups and the revelatory depth of their online communications. Hence, interesting and useful conclusions might be drawn from a relatively small number of messages, if these messages contain sufficient descriptive richness and are interpreted with considerable analytic depth and insight. A time-tested and recommended way to help to develop this insight is to write reflective fieldnotes. In these fieldnotes, “netnographers” record their own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions and personal emotions occurring during the research. These written reflections often prove invaluable to contextualizing the data and are a recommended procedure. However, in a sharp break from traditional ethnography, a rigorous “netnography” could be conducted using only observation and downloads, and without writing a single fieldnote.

As data analysis commences (often concomitant with data collection), the netnographer must contextualize the online data, which often proves to be more challenging in the social-cues-impoverished online context of “netnography.” Software solutions such as the QSR NVivo and Atlas.ti qualitative analysis packages can expedite coding, content analysis, data linking, data display, and theory-building functions (Paccagnella 1997, Richards and Richards 1994). However, classification and coding of data are important concerns that inevitably involve trading off symbolic richness for construct clarity (Van Maanen 1988). Perhaps even more than with ethnography, some of the most useful interpretations of

“netnographic” data take advantage of its contextual richness and come as a result of penetrating metaphoric and symbolic interpretation (Levy 1959, Sherry 1991, Thompson 1997), rather than meticulous classification.

Providing Trustworthy Interpretation.

For tracking the marketing related behaviors of online communities, “netnography” is a stand-alone method. It is a way in which to understand the discourse and interactions of people engaging in computer-mediated communication about market-oriented topics. During the course of netnographic data collection and analysis, the market researcher must follow conventional procedures that the research is reasonable or “trustworthy” (note: in most qualitative consumer research, the concept of “trustworthiness” is used rather than “validity,” see Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Lincoln and Guba 1985).

“Netnography” is based primarily upon the observation of textual discourse, an important difference from the balancing of discourse and observed behavior that occurs during in-person ethnography (cf. Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Informants therefore may be presumed to be presenting a more carefully cultivated and controlled self-image. The uniquely mutable, dynamic, and multiple online landscape mediates social representation and renders problematic the issue of informant identity (Turkle 1995). However, “netnography” seems perfectly suited to the approach of G. H. Mead (1938) in which the ultimate unit of analysis is not the person, but the behavior or the act. We might also draw insight from the work of founder of ‘the linguistic turn’ in philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (1953) might suggest that the posting of computer text is a social action (a communicative act or “language game”). If so, then every aspect of the “game” (the act, type and content of the posting, the medium, and so on) is relevant observational data in itself, capable of being trustworthy. Utilizing online data in this

manner requires a radical shift from traditional ethnography that observes people to “netnography” which observes and must recontextualize conversational acts. This shift is necessary because the characteristics of conversation in “netnography” are very different than they are in traditional ethnography: they occur through computer-mediation, are publicly available, generated in written text form, and the identities of conversants are much more difficult to discern.

Generally speaking, links to fixed demographic markers can be useful for some marketing strategy purposes (e.g., targeting), and “netnography” is more limited than traditional ethnography in this regard. The “netnographer” must determine their importance in relation to the research question and to the authority that will be granted to findings. It is worth noting that direct misrepresentation is discouraged in most online forums. Codes of etiquette (see Gunn 2000) and other social pressures are often in effect. Misrepresenting oneself as a member of a restricted group (e.g., women only, or under-18) is an offense punished by flaming, ostracism and banishment. However, triangulation of “netnographic” data with data collected using other methods, such as in interviews, focus groups, surveys, or traditional in-person ethnographies may be useful if the researcher seeks to generalize to groups other than the populations studied. Generalizing the study beyond particular online groups may not be necessary. Yet careful triangulation and long-term immersion in the community can be very useful to help marketing researchers distinguish hardcore, marginal extremists from a more typical group of consumers. It should be noted that, just as during in-person exchanges, extremists are derided. In the larger communities (with hundreds of active members) moderate views seem to prevail. Online communities do present fairly explosive environments and, freed of many of the usual social restraints

employed during in-person gatherings, hardcore extremists are often soundly condemned.

In summary, throughout “netnographic” data collection and analysis, the marketing researcher must be conscious that they are analyzing the content of an online community’s communicative acts rather than the complete set of observed acts of consumers in a particular community. This is a crucial difference between “netnography” and traditional ethnography. Stories of online misrepresentation are legion and important. Generalizations to markets or communities other than the one studied, online or off, must have corroborating evidence. To be trustworthy, the conclusions of a “netnography” must reflect the limitations of the online medium and the technique.

Research Ethics. One of the most important differences between traditional ethnography and “netnography” may be in issues of research ethics. Marketing researchers desiring to use “netnography” as a method are obliged to consider and follow ethical guidelines. These guidelines for ethical social science research in cyberspace have been the topic of recent debate. Ethical concerns over “netnography” turn on two nontrivial, contestable and interrelated concerns: (1) are online forums to be considered a private or a public site?, and, (2) what constitutes “informed consent” in cyberspace? A clear consensus on these issues, and therefore on ethically appropriate procedures for “netnography,” has not emerged.

In a major departure from traditional face-to-face methods like ethnography, focus groups, or personal interviews, “netnography” uses information that is not given specifically, and in confidence, to the marketing researcher. The consumers who originally created the data do not necessarily intend or welcome its use in research representations. Netnographers are professional “lurkers”: the uniquely unobtrusive nature of the method is

the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness. If marketing researchers undertaking “netnography” act in a manner found to be irresponsible and disrespectful by consumers, they may well damage the medium (by either suppressing outright or driving into secrecy previously open social interactions), and thereby “poisoning the research well” (Reid 1996). This is a real risk. White (1999) reports how music promoters avoided identifying themselves when they acted both as online marketers and as marketing researchers “trying to get a quick gauge on something, where you don’t want anyone’s guard to be up” (p. B1).

There is genuine debate about the public versus private issue. Speaking particularly about the electronic eavesdropping of observational ethnography, Rafaeli (quoted in Sudweeks and Rafaeli 1995) summarized the consensus of a certain group of scholars debating the private versus public issue by stating that informed consent was implicit in the act of posting a message to a public area. Given that certain precautions were taken to provide anonymity to informants, this group of scholars approved an ethical policy in which the informed consent of Internet posters was not required. King (1996), however, based his analysis on the notion that online forums dissolve traditional distinctions between public and private places, making conventional guidelines of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent unclear. King (1996) therefore concluded that, because consumers might be deluded about the quasi-public nature of their ostensibly private communications, gaining additional informed consent from them was the responsibility of researchers. Sharf (1999) echoed this heightened sensitivity to the ethics of even observational “netnography.”

The potential for “netnography” to do harm is a real risk. For instance, if a marketing researcher were to publish sensitive information overheard in a chat

room, this might lead to embarrassment or ostracism if an associated person's identity was discerned (see Hamman 1996). A number of informants have requested that I not publish statements they have posted on public bulletin boards, even though I always guarantee their anonymity. I have always honored these requests. This evidence supports the contention that "there is a potential for psychological harm to the members of these [online community] groups, depending on the way results are reported" (King 1996, p. 119).

Researchers who have published cultural secrets, portrayed people and practices inaccurately or treated customs, individuals and beliefs disdainfully have tainted the history of ethnography. The same potential for harm exists for "netnography." In a time of increasing public scrutiny of corporate actions and computer privacy issues, as well as institutional review board scrutiny in academia, "netnographers" would be wise to consider the chief ethical concerns apparent in "netnography": privacy, confidentiality, appropriation of others' personal stories, and informed consent (Sharf 1999).

Therefore, there are four ethical research procedures that I recommend for marketing researchers using "netnography." Although they parallel practices in conventional ethnography, these first three procedures are not at all obvious to those used to conducting web-searches and Internet research. They are: (1) the researcher should fully disclose his/her presence, affiliations and intentions to online community members during any research, (2) the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to informants, and (3) the researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched. There is an additional final procedure that is specific to the online medium. It involves taking a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue. This procedure

requires the researcher to contact community members and obtain their permission (informed consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research. Permission must also be obtained for using idiosyncratic stories as well (see Sharf 1999, p. 253-255). Obviously, before using any online artifacts such as newsletters, poetry, stories or photographs, permission from the copyright holder must be granted. Following these specially adapted research techniques will help ensure that ethical "netnography" is conducted that avoids poisoning the well for future researchers.

Member Checks. Member checks (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, p. 485; Hirschman 1986, p. 244; Lincoln and Guba 1985) are a procedure whereby some or all of a final research report's findings are presented to the people who have been studied in order to solicit their comments. Member checks prove particularly valuable for three reasons relating to the dissimilarity of "netnography" from traditional ethnography. First, because they allow researchers to obtain and elicit additional, more specific insights into consumer meanings, they are particularly valuable when conducting an unobtrusive, observational "netnography" (i.e., member checks add the opportunities for added development and error checking). Secondly, they help ameliorate some of the contentious ethical concerns described in the previous section, while still preserving the value of unobtrusive observation (because member checks are usually conducted after data collection and analysis has concluded). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, member checks can help to establish an ongoing information exchange between marketing researchers and consumer groups that is unprecedented in traditional qualitative research. Indeed, using the conduct of "netnography" as a forum for ongoing, widespread, bidirectional communication between organizations and their communities of customers could help realize some of the

hidden potential in the paradigm of relationship marketing.

As distinct from face-to-face ethnography, where member checks are burdensome and onerous (and therefore are sometimes omitted), and focus groups and interviews (where member checks are not usually employed), “netnographic” member checks are a generally simple and convenient matter. The low costs of computer-mediated communication enable the marketing researcher to easily provide any interested reader with some or all of the research text, either through posting it on a web-page, or sending it as an e-mail attachment. The elicitation and collection of informant comments is also greatly simplified and expedited through e-mail. Because member checks, as well as the other elements of “netnography,” can generally be completed in a more timely manner than face-to-face market-oriented ethnography, they provide the opportunity for marketers to detect and respond more quickly to the changing consumer tastes, meanings and desires that underlie important marketing trends. Given these methodological considerations, we can now proceed to a brief illustrative example of market research using “netnography.”

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: ANALYSIS OF THE MEANINGS OF CONTEMPORARY COFFEE CONSUMPTION IN AN ONLINE COFFEE COMMUNITY

Applying Netnographic Methodology

In the short illustrative section that follows, “netnography” will be illustrated as a marketing research method. “Netnography” will be used to explore and analyze some of the meanings and symbol-systems that surround contemporary coffee consumption (in particular those surrounding espresso and Starbucks) for the posters to an online community dedicated to coffee-related discussion. Understanding and tracking these

meaning and symbol systems is of considerable practical importance. As many marketers are aware, there have been tectonic shifts in the coffee market in the last decade. Major consumer packaged goods companies such as General Foods and Procter and Gamble were apparently caught unaware by the Seattle coffeehouse trend that came to be personified by the “Starbucks invasion” that overtook boutique coffee shops and subsequently encroached upon supermarket aisles (see Pendergrast 1999, Schultz and Yang 1999). Starbucks simultaneously raised the consciousness of coffee connoisseurship, the demand for coffee shops, the sales of coffee-flavored ice cream and cold drinks, and the market price of a cup of coffee.

An understanding of coffee meanings can be gleaned from a “netnography” of a dedicated coffee group. As with the membership of many online market-oriented communities, the members of this coffee group can be characterized as devoted, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and innovative. In their enthusiasm, knowledge, and experimentation with new forms of coffee consumption, they can provide information similar to that from “lead users,” the inventive consumers who are at the leading edge of significant new marketing trends (von Hippel 1986, 1988). While some may be marginal or hard core users, their creative ideas and insights should not be discounted as without value. By carefully evaluating their innovative ideas and by cross-validating the quality of information they provide about current consumption trends with other information sources, we can reach conclusions that can potentially inform decisions by those in the coffee market such as consumer packaged goods companies, coffee house retailers, coffee mail order companies (both online and off), and advertisers working on coffee-related accounts. By carefully corroborating, interpreting and critically evaluating this information, insights might be gained to

inform new product concepts, new positioning strategies, new advertising campaigns, new distribution tactics and other marketing strategies and practices. Understanding this online community's messages and their medium can also provide insight into the use of newsgroups and other online media for coffee-related marketing.

This "netnography" into online coffee culture began with an overview of the newsgroups that contained the term "coffee" and were available from my local server. These revealed three potential newsgroups: <alt.coffee>, <alt.food.coffee>, and <rec.food.drink.coffee>, as well as several others. <Alt.coffee> was chosen because it had by far the highest amount of traffic (approximately 75 messages per day) and therefore contained the most data. According to 1995 Arbitron data, <alt.coffee> is ranked 1042 out of all newsgroups, is carried by 40% of all service providers, and is read by 55,939 people worldwide (Reid 1995).³ It contains a core of "insiders" who are frequently quoted and referenced by other community members, deferred to by existing and new members, and mentioned by members as important arbiters of coffee taste. Thus, employing an informal type of network analysis, these insiders seem to be usefully conceptualized as opinion leaders in the local context of this particular online community. It also contains many "minglers" who stay on for periods of six months to a year, and a large number of "tourists" who come and go with specific queries. Past newsgroup surveys indicated that posters were mostly male and well-educated, with an average age of forty-eight. As part of ongoing research, <alt.coffee> and related newsgroups were followed, with noteworthy messages downloaded, since February 1998. Several hundred messages

were read over the 33 months of "netnographic" research. In addition, the research was informed by searches of coffee-related web-pages, web-rings, mailing lists, reading of books about coffee, coffee consumption experimentation and in-person product-related discussions with coffee consumers and connoisseurs. To keep the amount of data limited to a manageable level, the investigation was limited to 179 postings that were downloaded and printed. The majority of the messages that were downloaded were posted between July and November 2000.

The 179 postings were pre-classified (before downloading) into topics either relevant or not relevant to the research topic of interest (contemporary coffee meanings). So, for example, threads (a thread is a set of interrelated bulletin board postings) like "Coffee Poem," and "How to make a great cappuccino at home," were pursued. Threads such as "NY Chocolate Show" were not, because they were judged not to be relevant. In order to discover not only what constituted good coffee, but to understand its antithesis, several message threads related to Postum, such as "Anyone tried or heard of this?," were explored and downloaded. As the investigation narrowed onto discussion of Starbucks, the "Weird Starbucks Experience," "Peets So Good," and "Americans-your thoughts on Starbucks wanted" threads were downloaded. The importance of espresso to the community was also evident as the investigation narrowed. This topic was explored in "Woohoo, just got my Silvia/Rocky." These threads were chosen for their rich content, descriptiveness, relevant topic matter and conversational participation by a range of different community members. The range of conversational participation was important to avoid the research being misled or unduly influenced by a minority of unrepresentative and vocal extremists.

Utilizing carefully-chosen message threads in "netnography" is akin to

³ Given the growth of the Internet between 1995 and 2000 and the doubling of message postings on <alt.coffee> during that period, it is likely that as of 2000 the newsgroup had over 100,000 readers worldwide.

“purposive sampling” in market-oriented ethnography (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Lincoln and Guba 1985). Because findings are to be interpreted in terms of a particular sample it is not necessary that the sample be representative of other populations. However, there is the potential for anonymous self-promotion by manufacturers and retailers. Therefore, messages that were suspect in this manner (i.e., overly engaging in promotion, or containing an email address related to the company they were commenting upon) were excluded from the dataset. In addition, and where possible to do so, apparently off-topic useless talk was coded and excluded from analysis because it did not pertain to the central topic of coffee consumption.

The coding of the postings involved both data analysis and data interpretation (Spiggle 1994, p. 492). “Netnographic” data in each categorized interaction was compared to the data with other events coded as belonging to the same category, inquiring into their similarities and differences (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Spiggle 1994). Each category later formed a theme, abstract or grounded theory, or “metaobservation” (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, McCracken 1988, Lincoln and Guba 1985). For this research, the volume of text was 198 double-spaced 12 point font pages, representing 117 postings containing 65 distinct e-mail addresses and user names (likely related to the number of distinct individuals posting messages). Disconfirming evidence was sought, both within the dataset and in later searches of web-pages and the <alt.coffee> newsgroup, and resulted in several early themes being rejected. Concomitantly with analysis, the data was subject to interpretation, which, as Spiggle (1994, p. 497, 500) describes it, is “playful, creative, intuitive, subjective, particularistic, transformative, imaginative, and representative.”

To ensure research ethics, I identified myself in postings to the community, told members about the observation, and provided

my credentials. Permission was sought and granted to use direct quotes. To ensure a “trustworthy” interpretation (Lincoln and Guba 1985), member checks with nine online informants were conducted. Member check informants said they were “impressed” by the “netnography,” thought it was “perceptive” and even “fantastic.” They also had several suggestions. Member checks resulted in revisions to the depiction of basic coffee (including presspot and vacpot preferences), commodification and religious devotion, and the provision of some additional group characteristics.

A Brief Netnography of Online Coffee Culture on the <alt.coffee> Usenet Newsgroup

As Sherry (1995, p. 356) has noted, “Coffee is among the preeminent vessels of meaning in consumer culture” (see also Pendergrast 1999). This richness of meaning is clearly evident in the vital and virtuosic exchanges transpiring through <alt.coffee>. Like any thoroughgoing culture, the denizens of the <alt.coffee> newsgroup carry their own language. Their posted conversations are peppered with terms unfamiliar to the uninitiated: baristas and JavaJocks, cremas and roastmasters, tampers and superautomatics, livias and tiger flecks. It is the specialized language of the coffee lover, conveying many of the subtleties of coffee taste and preparation.

Understanding the language of consumer segments and its specific underlying social motivations is a key aspect to achieving the market orientation (Kohli and Jaworski 1990) that can successfully conceptualize new products, employ existing and new channels and write potent advertising that meaningfully communicates to markets. While a full translation of this newsgroup’s language is impossible in this article, we can examine some important cultural themes contained within it. In this short “netnography,” we examine themes of

distinction, consumption webs, commodification concerns and religious devotion. Marketing research implications will be specified throughout, and extended in the conclusion.

Distinction: Decoding the Language of Motivation. On <alt.coffee>, we are repeatedly taught the specifics of coffee connoisseurship. One of the first things we learn is that “basic coffee,” the type that most of us enjoy in our offices and homes, is usually beneath contempt because it is “normally very badly prepared and stale.” Proper coffee, flavorful coffee, must be prepared correctly. This means avoiding paper filters and drip coffee (and percolators) and instead using gold filters, cafetiere, press pots, or vacuum pots (in order of preference). Yet while it may not be the most frequently consumed form, the most discussed form of coffee on the newsgroup is espresso. Real coffee, precious coffee, *essential coffee* (both literally and figuratively), is espresso, consumed without “cow juice” or sugar. Making good espresso, we learn, is a complicated affair. It involves attending carefully to the water, the grind, timing the shot, knowing your machine, keeping its portafilter (portable filter) and screen clean, the tamper, the blend, the ambient temperature, the age of the coffee, the degree of the roast, the air humidity, incoming water temperature, internal boiler temperature, and even such mystical elements as the mood of the barista [coffee server] and “good old-fashioned luck.”

These are not merely functional considerations, but online incantations of status, upward social movement and hedonism intended to manifest and demonstrate the “distinction” or “cultural capital” of upper class tastes and abilities (Bourdieu 1984, see also Holt 1998). There is an elitist or classist “snob appeal” to coffee knowledge that motivates discerning tasting, as well as the reading of coffee-related books such as “Uncommon Grounds” (Pendergrast

1999) and authoritative guides such as the site of “Schomer.” As Levy (1981) convincingly demonstrates, there are strong links between discernment, social class and the acculturated sense of taste. This acculturation of the complexities of taste and flavor appears to transpire online. For example, the flavor of good espresso is much discussed and described online (it is not too watery and not too burnt tasting but has a slight agreeable bitterness and a slight astringency).

Also, the group’s discursive actions enact a deep desire to go behind the scenes, to understand what it is that makes a particular type of coffee superior, and then to capture, reproduce, and by reproducing, become a part of the productive-consumption of the experience. This productive-consumption is also a status marker. Home espresso brewing is a fairly expensive hobby (but not prohibitively so for the American middle-class), which is partially why it can serve as a distinctive marker. This need to not only consume, but to actively produce, is a hallmark of deep devotion to a particular consumption orientation, such as is found in a range of subcultural, sport, music and media fan experiences (see, e.g., Fiske 1989).

Consumption Webs: Mapping the Paths of Desire. The key to these descriptions is not merely their specifics (although these are of course equally important to consumers and the marketers who seek to serve them) but the amazing rarity that is conveyed within them, the scarcity evident in all the stressing over when to pull, when to tamp, how to time, which machine, which coffee bean. One member cautioned that only out of every five pulls are worth drinking, which makes educating one’s palate about good espresso a difficult task. As with wine production and tasting, production and discernment of espresso takes time and practice. Some coffeephiles opine that their tastebud training took months. One active <alt.coffee> poster stated that it gestated for nine months. This coffeephile noted that the down side to

educating his palate was that he became a slave to coffee, and eventually spent huge amounts of money to keep himself from being subjected to more ordinary coffee (which had become unbearable to him). He also noted that there was no end to his involvement. Once acculturated, he kept finding new pieces of coffee equipment that he could not live without, a state of affairs he jokingly-yet-pointedly blamed on his fellow alt.coffee coffeephiles.

The marketing research implications of these postings lay in the way in which some coffeephiles describe their motivation to develop taste leading to the expenditure of large amounts of money on coffee equipment. Once acculturated into the proper taste of espresso and its rarity, these consumers reject conventional coffee offerings (often giving them terrible, excretory names) and popular cafés (often emphasizing their robotic qualities) and are drawn into multiple investments for which there seem no end. The comments above, in which a coffeephile ascribes his increasing investment to the influence of a fellow newsgroup member suggest the power of the newsgroup to acculturate consumption practices. This acculturating force, which drives increasing investments in a new cultural interest, has been termed the “Diderot effect” (McCracken 1990). In the <alt.coffee> newsgroup, there is evidence for an acculturated transition from regular home-brewed coffee, to basic press pots (such as the Bodum) to better press pots to vacuum pots. Another is from home-brews to café-bought coffee, to café-bought “fancier” drinks like latté and cappuccino, to store-bought espresso, to home-made espresso, which requires a starter machine, then a better machine, a coffee bean grinder, then a coffee bean roaster, then a kitchen vent for your roaster, then better beans, and so on. This subtle inculcation of coffee tastes (on a trajectory culminating in a taste for espresso) is often mapped out in coffeephile communications, tracing a gustatory route

through, for example, cappuccino, macchiato and con panna to espresso.

In total, this set of united products could be interpreted as a “product constellation” (Solomon and Assael 1987) linked to the real or desired social class of these coffee drinkers. For marketing researchers, this product map might be thought of as a particular consumption web that increasingly draws a group of consumers into deeper and more profound levels of (sub)cultural involvement and enthusiasm, consumption and investment. Understanding the configuration of these particular consumption webs would provide coffee-related manufacturers and retailers with ideas for new product and service offerings and bundling (for example, bundling together brands of products that are seen as associated with other brands; bundling together kitchen venting systems with roasters; bundling features on espresso machines to produce consumer-related forms of coffee).

Commodified Brands: Brand Image and Community Concerns. Another important cultural code links good coffee to passion, artistry, and authenticity as a fully realized human being. The discussions that reveal this centered upon the nature of the “barista,” or coffee server. The online coffeephiles proclaim that “the product (be it food or coffee)” is always “an expression of the maker’s personality” because it is “an art after all” [“Vincent⁴,” posted on <alt.coffee> 08/06/2000], that a “barista” infers “an artisan...like a seasoned sommelier or vintner” [“Angelo,” posted on <alt.coffee> 08/09/2000]. Several posters claim that they would not visit a café whose baristas were not coffee lovers (and several others disagreed). An existential dimension is added by one of the original posters, in which he rejects the term “artisan,” but says that being an authentic barista “has to do with the way you

⁴ Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect informant confidentiality.

live your life.” Coffee becomes, to this culture member, a metaphor for life, in which either life is mere rule following “or you really experience what life is all about” [“Vincent,” posted on <alt.coffee> 08/09/2000]. The mark of authenticity is baristas who “drink/live coffee” just as do the denizens of <alt.coffee>. It is passion that matters: “Coffee is the passion of a barista and a lifelong profession” [“Peter,” posted on <alt.coffee> 08/13/2000]. This emphasis is also present in an online debate between Starbucks employees. The more passionate coffee drinker (ex-employee) accused the other (current employee):

“Coffee is just another product for you too. You could just as well be selling those turnip twaddlers of flame retardant condoms, but as long as you are having fun and paying your bills, that is all that matters to you, right? I am afraid that it is not quite that simple for many of us. We take our coffee very seriously, and to have it demeaned in such a manner is a slap in the face. Coffee is much more than a tool. It is passion, it is intrigue, mystery, seduction, fear, betrayal, love, hate, and any other core human emotion that you can think of, all wrapped into one little bean.” —Peter, posted on <alt.coffee> 08/14/2000

Because Peter’s rich and revealing comments were applauded and referenced by many different members of the online community, they seem to cut to the core of some important (and shared) impressions of Starbucks among <alt.coffee> members. Coffee is emotional, human, deeply and personally relevant—and not to be “commodified” (Kopytoff 1988) or treated as “just another product.” This concern is reflected in two negative newsgroup nicknames for Starbucks: as an expensive and faceless corporate entity, it is “*\$”; as a killer of mom-and-pop local stores it is “corporate

coffee.” Presenting important cultural clues to the positioning of any new coffee marketer that seeks to compete with the Starbucks brand, the discussion of Starbucks turned into a more general discussion of the perils of commercialization and cultural commodification. The resentment over the commodification of coffee connoisseurship leads to dialectics of authenticity and genuineness:

What I am coming to in my own life and consumer behavior is that I want to support and savor the true specialty items while I can. I’d rather eat Barry’s fudge...than Godiva ‘faux specialty’ chocolates. And I’d rather drink the local café’s coffee rather than Starbucks’s because, well, those tiny, passionate companies are more precious than Starbucks....Any corporation with food chemists can make Starbucks’ product, IMO [in my opinion]. Only a passionate, driven romantic would keep making top-notch specialty coffee day in and day out. Lose Starbucks and another clone clicks into that economic eco-niche. Lose a lover or a hero and you might wait a long time until another comes along. —“Fred,” posted on <alt.coffee> 11/19/2000

Fred’s dialectic transcends functional characteristics such as coffee flavor. Its overriding theme is that vendors or manufacturers should demonstrate a genuine passion for the product equal to, or close to, that of its connoisseur consumers. This sentiment resists, in some sense, the commodification of labor in which people can be mechanistically trained to produce items without enjoying them as consumers. It is a postmodern longing to return to productive-consumption (Firat and Dhalokia 1998). Fred’s dialectic of commodification reflects a search for authenticity, ties to the local, caring by producers, craftsmanship and artistry. In

the same posting, Fred explains that to support Starbucks is not to support local merchants like “Tom” a coffee “maven” who is obsessed with “the Zen of the cup” (a spiritual-religious metaphor connoting devotion and authenticity). To support local cafes is not only a statement about coffee, but about human values and the world. As Fred states, it helps to maintain “a world of beauty and passion.”

Religious Devotion: Uncovering Meaningful Metaphors. This utopian “world of beauty and passion” is evident in the wonderfully detailed accounts of coffee preparation and consumption provided in the newsgroups, which serve as sources of espresso education, expressionism and exhibitionism. Members draw one another in with dramatic flair and literary devices that playfully hint at the joyful mindset of the coffee connoisseur and, tongue-in-cheek, employ sacred metaphors. Describing himself in the third person, “Jerry” lovingly details (in several pages of text) his exact experiences with his new coffeemaker:

He hit the brew switch [on his new Livia 90 cappuccino/espresso maker]...at first, nothing. Then...beautiful reddish-brown crema...the “tiger flecks” he had heard so much about but rarely had seen flowed forth and fell just short of two ounces in 25 seconds. He stood just admiring the crema when suddenly a voice called to him, “The milk! The Milk!” —Jerry, posted on <alt.coffee> 11/02/2000

As with Fred’s “passion,” his David and Goliath-story “hero,” and ‘world of beauty,’ the language Jerry uses here is romantic, idealistic and Biblical. The crema (oil from the coffee beans) is “beautiful,” and it “flowed forth” much like a river of milk and honey might do for Old Testament Israelites. Jerry did not simply remember to steam the milk, but portrayed it as “a voice” that “called

[un]to him,” as if he were a Biblical prophet. The drama and religion may be parodic, but are repeatedly present and meaningful as a local cultural code, indicating that this is not merely the meandering of extremists. For example, other postings replicate the dramatic and religious metaphor, calling the lack of passion by a “Starbucks Jock” “Sacrilige!” and the placing of sugar in espresso the mark of one who “has no soul.”

The interpretive coup de grâce may be in the term that this community of coffeephiles uses for the elusive, religious experience, the exhaustive apotheosis of espresso moments, the holy grail of the coffee dream quest. It is called a “god shot.” It represents the sublime moment of coffee productive-consumption, an absolutely perfect, indefinable moment of glory, one that cannot be captured, reproduced or summoned at will. A god-shot is a supernatural event. It is a moment when human being and nature are reunited in a perfect convergence of elements (water, fire, air, earth/grounds), resulting in a perfectly pleasurable occurrence. This interpretation does not suggest that coffee consumption is *actually* a religion for these coffeephiles. But for them it has religious aspects of search, passion, and transcendence (see Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), and deeply meaningful ties to identity (Fiske 1989). As comments to Jerry’s postings indicate, these metaphors are highly motivational and persuasive, and thus of interest to marketing researchers.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Deriving from naturally-occurring, communal, cross-consumer interaction that is not found in focus groups or personal interviews, “netnography” reveals interesting consumer insights, impressions, linguistic conventions, motivations, consumption web linkages and symbols. It provides feedback on brands and products that has not been elicited in any way by marketers —eliminating the

researcher-induced demand effects of these methods and of traditional ethnographic inquiry and interview. The method achieves all of this in a manner that is far more unobtrusive, convenient and accessible than traditional ethnography. It is also far more economical.

As the consumer verbatims and descriptions provided above may attest, online consumers tend to be knowledgeable, educated, and to provide interesting consumption insights. Because message posters are in some respect self-selected for their eloquence, the data they provide can be extraordinarily rich. Online posters appear to spend large amounts of time and money on their focal consumption activity. By carefully evaluating their innovative ideas, their knowledge base and their consumer insights, marketing researchers can obtain useful information similar to that obtained from “lead users” (von Hippel 1986, 1988). Ideas for innovative trends in particular realms of consumption such as novel product concepts may thus be initiated by investigations that begin with “netnography.” However, careful consideration and cross-validation of the online data will be critical to avoiding being misled by overly zealous or vocal community members. Similarly, cross-validation and a careful categorical analysis will be required to understand the relationship of different types online community member to typical online and offline consumers.

Implications of <alt.coffee>
Netnography. Given the familiar diffusion of innovations model, it can easily be argued that today’s devoted or extreme consumer perspective can yield important insights into the more mainstream consumer behavior of tomorrow (von Hippel 1988). The implications of this marketing research for wise coffee marketers are thus considerable. It may have appeared, in the wake of Starbucks, that marketers had been one-upped by the Seattle coffeehouse craze, and had missed the opportunity to raise the market to its new

upscale level. Yet, if the market intelligence of the <alt.coffee> group is correct, coffee marketers have barely even begun to plumb the depths of taste, status and snob appeal waiting to be explored by discriminating, in-need-of-market-education coffee consumers.

Experimental and innovative online coffee consumers offer a range of discoveries that, like a lead user analysis, inform our understanding of coffee marketing trends. For not only does <alt.coffee> offer the enticing consumption webs and socialization pressures that can turn decaffeinated drinkers into home-roasting, home-brewing, espresso savorers, willing to throw out four shots of expensive brew in search of the all-elusive but sublimely satisfying “god shot,” but it also suggests that there is far more to coffee consumption than the in-person “social,” “communal,” and socially responsible aspects that has been so successfully exploited by Starbucks. New brands and blends of beans, new means of delivering the freshest of fresh beans (online and off), new means of roasting, new bean roasting services, new espresso and cappuccino machines, new forms of education and instruction, new coffee tasting clubs, and new types of cafés are super-premium opportunities that await further evaluation and exploration by opportunistic new product developers and market educators.

From the practical standpoint of professional marketing researchers, identifying appropriate online communities for particular marketing research clients is more art than science. As this <alt.coffee> “netnography” demonstrates, the information present in a particular newsgroup is likely to be of more value to certain types of industry players. In <alt.coffee>, the information is particularly valuable to online and offline marketers of high-end espresso makers, roasters, grinders, cafés, roasted and unroasted coffee beans, and those selling coffee connoisseurship-related goods.

However, the information provided in the “netnography” about coffee’s cultural

cachet (relating it to social distinction, artisanship, craftsmanship, personal involvement, passion, authenticity, humanity and religious devotion) might be useful in articulating a range of positioning and branding strategies with wider appeal. For example, newsgroup participants' critique of Starbucks brand meaning (seen as mechanistic, dispassionate, oppressive, overly large and lacking humanity or a human touch) might be seen as feedback to Starbucks, and opportunity for Starbucks' competitors. If the Starbucks brand is becoming passé, a mere symbol ("*\$") of over-roasting, a good place to read and hang out but not to drink coffee, then the next generation of coffee brands to tap into the discriminating coffee ethos will likely thrive by positioning on the opposite end of these dimensions: human, passionate, roasted-right, free, alive, locally involved, existentially complete. These cultural meanings will draw on rich associations to art and artisanship, craftsmanship and connoisseurship—perhaps even religion and spirituality—and do it in a manner that is authentic and genuine. Coffee companies with a true market orientation will find opportunities in this "netnographic" data and their own coffee consumer communion not simply for a new appearance or façade, but for a depth of marketplace involvement and the understanding of a genuine, passionate coffee-lover.

Summary Conclusion. Online communities devoted to consumption-related topics are an increasingly important source of data for marketing research. These groups may be construed as individual market segments that are of interest in their own right and may be of noteworthy size. As purchase and consumption decisions are discussed and debated in online communities, it is important that marketing researchers have rigorous and ethical methodological procedures to collect and interpret this data in this novel and challenging context. As the illustrative

example demonstrates, "netnography" can be a useful, flexible, ethically-sensitive and unobtrusive method adapted to the purpose of studying the language, motivations, consumption linkages and symbols of consumption-oriented online communities.

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