

W5 on Online Ethnography

Online ethnography is an emerging research methodology that takes the principles of traditional ethnographic consumer observation and interaction to the virtual space.



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What is Online Ethnography?

Online Ethnography is a research approach that explores the human experience within the context of online interaction and communities that in part define their experience on the internet. Not to be confused with secondary research, online ethnography eschews scholarly research for direct observation of and interaction with consumers as they communicate online.

Online Ethnography is an ideal methodology for establishing a broader context for consumers' interests and lifestyles, as well as initial insight into motivations and barriers to brand and product interaction. An online medium permits a greater degree of anonymity and freedom for many individuals who typically monitor and filter their thoughts and opinions throughout their day-to-day lives. It also serves as an ideal setting for observing the lives of consumers for whom the internet is a dominant form of communication..

Online Ethnography is also particularly useful for gathering information in preparation for subsequent research. This methodology sets the stage for questioning in other study phases as it distills issues and focuses context.

The immediate question that faces online ethnography is whether or not it is possible to become immersed in consumer culture in a virtual space. Increasingly the answer to this question is a resounding “yes.”

More consumers are adopting broadband internet connections, participating in social networks, and creating media content than ever before. In all, more consumers are living their lives online, interacting with brands and products, providing greater opportunities for organizations to obtain valuable insight.

The difference between traditional and online ethnography

The field is relatively new, emerging only as internet technology and online interaction have reached points of near ubiquity. Traditional, in-person ethnography has long been an accepted research practice. Online ethnography applies the same principle – immersion in the lives of consumer cultures – in a virtual space.

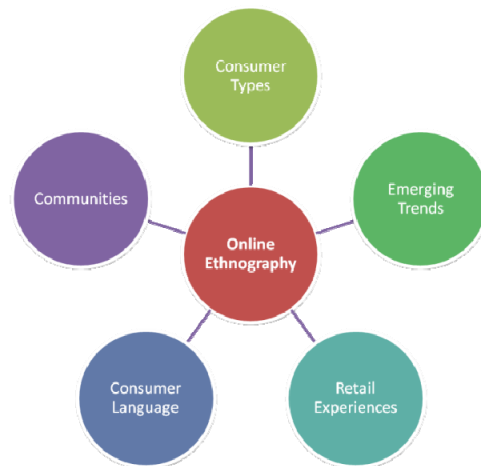
There is a distinction between traditional ethnography and online ethnography. Traditional ethnography in this case is anthropological research that physically takes place in the natural environment of a given community, culture, or consumer type.

Online ethnography evolves the practice for the internet and online communication. Certainly a new practice, it is only recently that the human experience has shifted so dramatically toward virtual interaction as a means of cultural identification as well as consumerism.

Online ethnography recognizes the power of a medium that can transcend physical limitations and instead focuses learning on mental and experiential immersion.

How can online ethnography help you meet your research objectives?

You do not always need a passport to step outside of familiar environments to better understand the consumer experience. The internet has increasingly moved from a broadcast medium to a space where communities can form and interaction can take place. It has become a virtual space that people can inhabit in many aspects of their lives, forming new communities, bonds, and relationships with others and the world around them. Online ethnography can be a valuable research, providing insight into each of the following:



- **Consumer Types:** Understanding specific consumer types and how they engage with products and brands online
- **Communities:** How online communities form and the tools they use to interact
- **Emerging Trends:** How markets change, pinpointing new developments
- **Retail Experiences:** Online retail experiences and consumer engagement with products in a virtual space
- **Consumer Language:** How language and conversation guide consumer identification with products and brands

Conducting online ethnography

There are two basic approaches to collecting data during online ethnographic research: *Observation* and *Online Interaction*. Selecting an approach is largely a function of the target audience and specific objectives of the research, and frequently an engagement will require both approaches.

Observation

This approach positions the researcher as a “lurker” in online communities and other websites, observing but not participating in the conversation. Observing online communities and other forums of consumer interaction allows the researcher to:

- Observe the flow of information and spread of ideas
- Understand how individual users gain credibility, thereby shedding light on the values the community holds
- Understand social connections in a virtual medium and how users filter their own content based on the channel and audience
- Track attitudes and perceptions toward brands and products they use in both virtual and physical spaces

Online Interaction

This approach embeds the researcher within online communities and other websites to directly interact and participate in the larger conversation. It is in this process that one can see the overlap between online and in-person ethnography.

In both instances, the ethnographers are immersed in the community and research is conducted in an unmediated environment. With informed consent, the ethnographer immerses themselves in the community and often replicates the user experience to gain insight into their particular attitudes, behaviors, values, as well as how they see themselves in the context of a larger community or culture.

Turning insight into action

After the completion of online ethnographic research, findings are analyzed and reported in the same fashion as other qualitative research methods. The validity and relevance of findings are assessed with the same level of analytical rigor and are meant to convey real insights.

The reporting of findings and the fit with an overall research plan is customized for each engagement. Online ethnography can be (1) an initial inquiry for a larger research initiative, giving research teams a baseline understanding of a consumer type or community; or (2) a standalone initiative with comprehensive reporting on observed attitudes and behaviors.

In either case, online ethnography can help your research team by:

- Helping you understand consumer behaviors, values, and preferences for product development or strategic marketing initiatives.
- Providing consumer-based insight to support the design of online experiences that correspond to your customers' needs.
- Providing inspiration for creative teams to develop concepts based on a better understanding of the consumer.
- Delivering insights that better focus online marketing initiatives and the development of branded web applications
- Delivering insights into consumer values that can drive social media marketing strategies
- Feeding follow up quantitative research with insights that can be tested as attributes and variables.

Why use online ethnography?

Online ethnography can fit into your company's research goals in a number of different ways:

Kick off a research plan with baseline insights

- Online ethnography can be a useful tool for organizations embarking on a large, multi-phased research initiative. Often online ethnography can launch an engagement to establish a framework of understanding for future research, contextualize the target audience, and provide key insights to drive later questioning.

Understand online consumer culture

- With the increasing number of people that shop, communicate, or otherwise interact through the Internet, online ethnography as a stand-alone research approach for consumer culture is increasingly important.

Investigate your brand

- Online ethnography is an essential methodology for understanding how products, brands, and services are discussed online. It can be a useful methodology for unpacking the conversations that consumers are having to better understand the current perception of a brand or product and also how it might evolve.

Support online strategies and inspire creative teams

- Online ethnography can be a key component of research initiatives designed to support online strategies. Virtual ethnographers can monitor conversations, interact with consumers, and analyze primary communication tools and channels. This can translate into a better understanding of how to reach key consumer segments through online advertising, messaging, or personal communication.

Want to know more?

If you want to learn more about how W5 can integrate Online Ethnography into your research, visit our website at www.W5insight.com, contact us at tdaly@W5insight.com, or call us any time at (919) 932-1117 for more information.