

Click to Connect: Netnography and Tribal Advertising

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Copywriters ground advertising insight in their understanding of the consumer. In contemporary consumer culture, much meaningful consumption takes place in a communal, collective, and tribal environment. Advertisers and copywriters in particular would benefit from a culturally-grounded understanding of the language, meanings, rituals, and practices of the consumer tribes with which advertising seeks to communicate. This article suggests that the rigorous application of netnography—the online practice of anthropology—could be helpful to advertisers and copywriters as they seek this enhanced understanding. Netnography is faster, simpler, timelier, and much less expensive than traditional ethnography. Because it is unelicited, it is more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups, surveys, or interviews. However, it still largely text-based, anonymous, poses ethical issues, is often overwhelming, can invite superficial and decontextualized interpretation, and requires considerable researcher acuity. In a detailed interpretation of a single newsgroup posting, I seek to demonstrate the level of cultural nuance required for quality netnographic interpretation and the potential of the method for generating technocultural insights to guide advertising copywriters.

IN KOVER'S (1995, p. 602) fascinating look into the process of advertising copywriting, he finds that copywriter's construct an internalized representation of their target consumer, "the other" with whom they try to build a bridging connection. Kover's copywriters repeatedly pitched ideas in their own mind and tested them against this internalized other. Their central goal was to break through into this represented consumers' distracted attention and to form an emotional connection with him or her through the advertisement that could then be transferred to the brand. It is a guiding assumption of this article that a deeper and more intimate understanding of the actual reality of the consumer will make this emotional connection more realistic and more likely. This article explains how the method of online ethnography, or netnography, is a useful method to help

gain the consumer understanding that can build a more accurate sense of what this internalized "other"—the mysterious consumer—is truly like.

In this overview and development of the method of netnography, I first discuss the altered advertising context of tribal consumer culture. I then explore the role and development of online communications and online community in fostering and expressing this new tribal reality. The method of ethnography is offered as a way to study online e-tribes or virtual communities of consumption. Some netnographic challenges and opportunities are detailed as well as some attendant cautions and guidelines. I then give some short examples from past netnographies I have conducted on entertainment and food consumption cultures. In particular, I offer a detailed unpacking of a single early post from a single *Star Trek* fan to demonstrate

the nuanced cultural understanding and interpretive subtlety and depth required for netnography to reveal holistic cultural realities. The article concludes with a discussion about the potential of netnography and its advantages in comparison to other methods.

TALKING TO THE TECHNO TRIBE

Consumer culture has split into a new world of consumer tribes. While big business and big government were consolidating and growing, and while many marketers and media people still talk about a "mainstream" that, like a mirage, evaporates upon hitting the line of sight, the world of the consumer has become irreducibly fragmented. For all of my life as an academic, I have been fascinated with these consumer tribes, particularly the way that they manifest, share, and build their culture online.

Consumers have gathered and met together from the beginning of consumption. Auto enthusiasts, quilting bees, and fan clubs are early examples of the impulse. Many consumer groups share an affiliation that is based upon enthusiasm and knowledge of a specific consumption activity or related group of activities. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) studied Harley-Davidson enthusiasts. I studied *Star Trek* and *X-Files* fans (Kozinets, 1997, 2001). Belk and Tumbat (2005) studied devout followers of Apple's "Cult of Macintosh." Tupperware parties and Mary Kay get-togethers channel the tribal impulse into commercial directions. Consumption-based gatherings are not limited to fan clubs, conventions, bike rallies, and in-home meetings, by any means, but spill out into virtual space and gather structure, momentum, and followers there. In an early paper of mine, I called the collectivities that consumers build online "e-tribes" and then defined the related term "virtual communities of consump-

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tion" as "the specific subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly center upon consumption-related interests" (Kozinets, 1999, p. 254).

The cultural currents that advertisers and marketers navigate daily in their dealings with the consumer world have been endlessly altered by combined cultural and technological changes, or "technocultural change" (Kozinets, 2000; see also Penley and Ross, 1991).¹ With our holstered Blackberries, our mobile phone headgear, our satellite dependencies, and our videogame thumbs, both our bodies and our consumer psyches are incontrovertibly technologically configured; technology has shaped and reshaped us and been shaped to our needs as well (Feenberg, 1999). Somehow, in the last decade, consumers stopped watching the big networks and, instead, became them. Instead of three channels, five major national mag-

azines, local newspapers, and a mass market, advertisers and marketers are expected to somehow meaningfully communicate brand meaning to a channel-surfing, parallel-processing, web-scanning "prosumer" (Kotler, 1986; Toffler, 1980) who creates as she consumes and is an active member of a variety of different collectivities, communities, and gatherings based on her unique combination of consumption, creativity, and interest. Some time in the last decade, Mr. and Mrs. Mass Consumer suddenly shifted into the iPod-toting, podcast-listening, TiVo-shifting, emailing list and Google board-subscribing blogger who gets their information on demand and skips the useless stuff in between the content, thank you very much. It was not only young consumers, either, although they were the crest of the wave. The internet was changing the reality of being a consumer for *everyone*.

The wiring is tribal. As cyborgs, consumers plug into consumer networks to connect. Their consumption and communication take on feedback loops. They communicate through information and

¹My use of the term *technoculture* is intended to mean that technology always changes culture and culture always changes technology; the two are intimately conjoined or, in less sexy academese, inextricably interrelated.

communication technology as never before. Although the internet is by far the largest, most visible, and most important of these networks, global consumers are jacking into mobile information networks, communicating through the creation and distribution of podcasts, digital photos, and video logs, and exchanging videotaped information made affordable and presentable by dramatic decreases in hardware and software technology. All of this technocultural change and activity raise an important question for marketing researchers, advertising executives, copywriters, and everyone interested in the reality of the consumer: what do we do with it? In the next section, I detail a method that takes the naturally occurring communications of these wired cyborg consumers and views it as research data that usefully informs a variety of business questions and marketing decisions.

NETNOGRAPHY RISING

I turned to the methods of cultural anthropology to study these technocultural gatherings of cyborg consumers. In a series of papers and articles, I developed the technique of "netnography." The *Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods* recently defined netnography as "a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts the traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of the online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications" (Jupp, 2006).

To briefly summarize the method, netnography adapts the open-ended practice of ethnography to the contingencies of the online environment. It provides guidelines for participant observation in the online environment that includes: (1) investigating possible online field sites, initiating, and making cultural entrée; (2)

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collecting and analyzing data; (3) ensuring trustworthy interpretations; (4) conducting ethical research; and (5) providing opportunities for the feedback of culture members (see Kozinets, 1998, 2002 for details).

I recently wrote an update of the method, somewhat facetiously called "Netnography 2.0" for an upcoming qualitative methods book (Kozinets, forthcoming). In it, I suggested that blogs, networked gamespaces, instant messaging chat windows, and mobile technologies are increasingly interesting and attractive places to conduct netnographies, and then I demonstrated how the technique adapted easily to the study of consumer blogs. In addition, I explored the flexibility of the method, which can be used as a purely observational method or as one that incorporates a high degree of participation.

A range of companies (often classified as WOM or word-of-mouth oriented), from MotiveQuest and Umbria Communications to Nielsen Buzzmetrics and Vocalpoint, are using techniques related to netnography to inform their clients' marketing decisions. In the academic world as well, the use of netnography is on the rise. All of the top-tier marketing and consumer research journals have now published articles based on netnographic data. Our understanding of consumption and social meanings in general and specific online consumer cultures across the globe is expanding rapidly due to the application of netnographic techniques.

Schau and Gilly (2003) use the method to study personal web pages and consumption meanings. Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2004) study a file-sharing

community. De Valck (2005) studied Dutch and Flemish online food culture. Nelson and Otnes (2005) study intercultural wedding message boards. Muñiz and Schau (2005) study followers of the defunct Apple Newton PDA. Langer and Beckman (2005) study Danish cosmetic surgery bulletin boards. Jeppesen and Frederiksen (2006) study musical instrument prosumers. Hemetsberger and Reinhardt (2006) study the open source community. Fong and Burton (2006) compare and describe American and Chinese digital camera discussion boards. Kim and Jin (2006) study online apparel discussions. Giesler (forthcoming) studies the Napster community. And there are many more opportunities for understanding "online."

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF NETNOGRAPHY

As a method, netnography is faster, simpler, and much less expensive than traditional ethnography. It can allow almost up-to-the minute assessments of consumers' collective pulse. Because it is unelicited, it is more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups, surveys, or interviews. Unlike surveys, it does not force consumers to choose from predetermined researcher assumptions but provides a wealth of grassroots, bottom-up generated information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups. It offers a powerful window into the naturally occurring reality of consumers. This information informs advertisers and marketers on the complex consumer cultures that have sprung up around a vast variety of consumption activities. It tells us about various taste

segments that exist, about the way brand positions are perceived, about particular brand meanings, attribute sets, and preferences. Like in-person, face-to-face (F2F) ethnography, it provides a window into the cultural realities of consumer groups as they live their activities: the local language, the history, the players, the practices and rituals, the enculturation, education, and eventual burn out of members in a life cycle of membership. These are potent opportunities.

However, there are matching challenges. It is relatively easy to download a few newsgroup postings, summarize them, and call oneself an online anthropologist. In fact, I am somewhat surprised that only a few people have done so already. There is a massive amount of data online, rendering these groups and their messages highly accessible to any curious investigator with access to a web browser. However, raw or medium-rare data are not information, and knowledge has differential degrees of power. It is easy to become overwhelmed by netnography's data tidal wave. How do we handle it? How do we tell what is relevant and what is not? As Mad-Eye Moody from Harry Potter might grumble in reply, "constant vigilance" is required.

Netnography is also limited by the textual nature of much of the communicative exchange, which misses much of the richness of in-person communication, with its tonal shifts, pauses, cracked voices, eye movements, body language, movements toward and away from, and so on. Some of these deficiencies are being ameliorated by online interviewing possible in programs such as Apple's iChat but the deficiencies can never be wholly overcome. When we translate human beings into digital communications, we are bound to lose vital information. Within a textual reality, the anonymity that is sometimes advantageous at obtaining disclosure pre-

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vents us from having confidence that we understand our discloser. What age, sex, ethnicity is the person who is "speaking" to us and seeking to inform our research? We currently have no reliable means of telling. We subsequently have no firm basis for making comparisons or offering conclusions that are in any sense reliably generalizable.

Some scholars have indirectly disputed the value of researcher participation in netnography (Langer and Beckman, 2005), asserting that "covert studies" of online communities are desirable. Further, they suggest that netnographic data should be treated as content to be content analyzed. However, I believe that removing the role of ethnographer from netnography also removes the opportunity for embedded cultural understanding, the *in simpatico*, tribal-dance-joining, phenomenological *verstehen* for which ethnography is famous. Without ethnographic insight, netnography is turned into a coding exercise. This is a constant temptation, for it is far easier in many ways to code cultural data than to live, probe, and understand it.

A major related challenge of ethnographic work in general deals with the researcher's ability to provide a systematic and delicate contextualization of in-

formation. One would not rely only on the information one finds in a particular village, or spoken in a particular dialect to describe an entire culture. Similarly, online information is only able to give a part of the consumption story—consumers' reality is multifaceted and the more facets investigated and described the richer and more useful the portrayal proffered. There is the same need for researcher interpretive skill, the same high standards for "the researcher-as-instrument" that luminary consumer anthropologist John Sherry (1991) wrote about in relation to F2F ethnography.

My opinion is that it takes an experienced and adept ethnographer to be a good netnographer. Without detailed cultural knowledge and an ability to follow a cultural investigation through to all of the touchpoints that matter (both F2F and virtual), a netnography is not going to have the impact or reliability that it needs to have in order to inform important decisions or build valid understanding. In the following section, I briefly outline a few of the netnographic studies I have performed and talk about a few of the interpretive challenges I needed to follow through in order to attain a wider cultural understanding.

NUANCING NETNOGRAPHIC KNOWING:

AN EXAMPLE

My research into *Star Trek* and related media science fiction, fantasy, anime, horror, and comic book fandom began in person in 1995 and continues netnographically to this day, with new areas of opportunity constantly opening up. To set some pragmatic implications, *Star Trek* is arguably the most successful television show in history, with five television series, ten movies, enough collectible merchandise to fill three phonebook-thick catalogs, and a multibillion dollar industry collectively known as the *Star Trek* franchise. The fan community spans the globe and has been estimated at 30 million people. *Star Trek* is a powerful brand that has spawned its own tribal community. A deeper knowledge of this fan community would help manage *Star Trek*'s brand with its multimillion person constituents. In addition, the principles of understanding this community's online manifestation are relevant to the understanding of a community built around any particular brand, product, or consumption activity.

My *Star Trek* research began with convention field research and opened onto the terrain on online community and communications when I discovered months later from *Star Trek* fan club members that a lot of their fan activity was now taking place online, that the internet (actually it was early consumer online service or Prodigy at that time) had become, in the words of one of the fans, "like a 24/7 convention." As devoted technology enthusiasts, *Star Trek* and other science fiction fans were actually among the very first online communities forming and using the Usenet and other early bulletin board systems (BBS). Through technology, I learned more about *Star Trek* and media fandom, and through fandom, I learned more about computer-mediated communication and

online community. It was through *Star Trek* fans that I learned how to download messages, proper syntax and netiquette, and what emoticons were and how to use them.

I performed a number of web searches in those days. I could find archived *Star Trek* fan postings on groups like <fa.sf-lovers> and <fa.human-nets> going back to May 14, 1981 (for comparison's sake Google's oldest archived newsgroup posting is May 11, 1981). A number of commentators have noted that *Star Trek* newsgroups were among the very first bulletin boards. For our purposes, I randomly chose one early post that I could locate on the deja.com newsgroup (the newsgroup archive was Deja News before it went out of business and its archives were acquired by Google and released as Google groups). Consider the following posting your first exposure to the *Star Trek* fan culture. [Following ethnographic practice, I have provided pseudonyms for message posters to help provide confidentiality. This confidentiality is more symbolic than real (although this particular post is 20 years old). Anyone who can operate a search engine could pull up the original message in its entirety. This is simultaneously an auditing dream and anonymity nightmare. These postings, made no doubt under various privacy assumptions 20 years ago, are now undeniably a matter of public record.]

Title: Responses to Some Postings
Newsgroup: net.startrek
[Matthew]: - view profile
Date: Sun, Jun 10 1984 8:35 am

> The time between STTMP and
ST-TWOK is supposed to be about
15 years,
> [Tony]

Not quite. Kirk says in TWOK that he hasn't seen Khan in 15 years. That means it is 15 years between the first season of the *tv show* and TWOK. Since we don't know how long the *Enterprise* had been around before the first season (remember her first Captain was Pike), so the ship might have been on a "five-year mission" before Kirk ever got ahold of her. Twenty years old seems right to me.

> 5. Of course, Sulu has to land the ship
instead of everyone just beaming
> down. Would you risk your neck (and
the relative location of same) on
> the chance that the crew can figure
out how to *correctly* operate the
> Klingon transporter? I'm sure the
Klingon prisoner would be eager to
> help...
> [Albert]

I can just hear the dialogue now ...

Kirk: "Tell, you what, JhoeBloe, show
us how to operate this transporter,
and I promise we'll kill you."

Klingon: "Ok, but no funny stuff this
time!"

> What really caught my eye, how-
ever, was the true source of this
> item. It is copyrighted 1984 by Para-
mount Pictures!
[Franklin]

Well, yeah, of course it is. Anything
that is licensed for publication as a
STAR TREK item, regardless of who
does it, is copyrighted by Paramount
Pictures. Anyone *not* putting a copy-
right notice on such an item is open to
a copyright infringement lawsuit. That
doesn't make it an "official" part of the
STAR TREK canon.
[Matthew, Minnesota, MO]

It seemed to me at first that reading online messages such as this one was analogous to entering an entirely different culture. We know with certainty that we are entering a world of significance, one where specific concerns truly matter to the speakers. There are rules, customs, particular personalities, and most obviously of all a new language. The many acronyms, references, and questions are filled with meanings that require interpretation. In the same sense that Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss, or Clifford Geertz entered a new human culture and sought to interpret and explain it, so too did I need a cultural understanding to interpret these messages. Translating the language was the key to understanding the culture.

On the most obvious level, it is apparent that this posting is an asynchronous, textualized conversation. The single paragraphs are statements by particular speakers that edit and respond to prior conversational statements. Matthew's text starts from the left margin, whereas a greater-than sign sets off the messages that he cites. In 1984, people seem to have used their actual names (rather than handles like "Trekker_123" which became popular later), and many gave their actual addresses. This is thus a conversation statement in which Matthew responds to prior statements by Tony, Albert, and Franklin. It seems likely from the depth of content and the number of conversationalists that it is a long-running conversation.

On the surface level, the first confusing hurdle is composed of acronyms. STTMP and ST-TWOK are somewhat strange, although the ST obviously would stand for *Star Trek*. Without precise knowledge of the meaning of these acronyms, it is very difficult to be certain what these fans are discussing. From my own knowledge of the fan community, gleaned through my

ethnographic exposure to fan clubs and conventions, I know that these acronyms refer to the names of the first two movies: *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, and *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*. This information is like the missing Rosetta Stone (now there are numerous FAQs and Wikipedia entries that offer up *Star Trek* acronyms); the discussion is about the content of then-recent *Star Trek* movies. Matthew's post begins with a correction of Tony's earlier post regarding the timeline in the official *Star Trek* universe about how much time has passed between the events depicted in the two motion pictures. Tony has asserted that this time period was 15 years. However, Matthew corrects Tony, noting that it was 15 years between the events of the second movie and the first season of the television show. Exhibiting excess knowledge of the *Star Trek* universe (i.e., that Captain Pike was the Enterprise's first captain and that he launched it on its five-year mission), Matthew uses some unnecessary mathematical reasoning to arrive at a figure of 20 years between the Enterprise's launch and the second *Star Trek* film.

Next, Matthew turns his attention to a decontextualized quote of a posting by Albert and addresses only point five out of Albert's prior list. Tracing back, I find Albert's former listing that is about what he did not like about TSFS—the third *Star Trek* movie, titled *The Search for Spock* (at this point the pattern of fans liking even-numbered movies and disliking odd-numbered ones had not yet been established, or broken). Here, Matthew builds humorously on Albert's posting about the *Star Trek* crew's use of a Klingon transporter. His joke offers a bit of fictional screenplay, plays on the toughness of the Klingons, and puns on the new Klingon language, adding a guttural "Jh" sound to the American colloquialism "Joe Blow."

Continuing this pattern of short decontextualized quotes, Matthew then takes a piece from a posting by Franklin. Unfortunately, Franklin's message is not archived and may have been lost into the ether(net) forever, so we have to do a bit of suppositional detective work on it. From Matthew's response, it appears that Franklin is referring to a published work, yet from his surprise it appears that this probably was not an official adaptation of a movie or television show, but an original work—perhaps one written by fans. Jenkins (1992), Bacon-Smith (1992), and others have written about science fiction and *Star Trek* fan fiction, some of which is sexual in nature and offers "slash" homoerotic pairings, particularly of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock.

Matthew is somewhat derogatory in his response to Franklin. He notes, as if chastising Franklin that he should know this, that any written material that uses the copyrighted *Star Trek* name is legally obligated to include a copyright notice stating Paramount Pictures' ownership of the copyright. Clarifying one of the most important aspects of fan culture, Matthew notes that the mere presence of a copyright does mean that a written work should be treated as something that actually happened in the authentic *Star Trek* story line. This official status is reverently called "canon" by *Star Trek* fans, who consider only the television shows and all of the movies (excluding *Star Trek V*) to be elements of the "official" *Star Trek* narrative.

This one message posting, given a fairly deep read (and this reading truly is only scratching the surface), unfolds in a fractal-like fashion, with intertextual links, to reveal some of the fundamental concerns and practices of *Star Trek* consumption and its fan culture. What cultural activity is transpiring here? Why are these things being written? The posting reveals the type of fan exchanges that I also found to

be common in fan clubs and during conventions, and helps to start explaining why they occur. Matthew's correction, chastising, and education of Tony and Franklin point to his need to demonstrate his mastery of the *Star Trek* material. Fans generally like to impress one another with their knowledge of the core text and of the fandom that surrounds it. With this public set of "Responses to some posts," Matthew is publicly exhibiting his expertise as a *Star Trek* fan. He does so in a fairly cordial, informal way, with phrases such as "not quite" "well, yeah, of course," but it is clear that he treats the topic of *Star Trek* seriously. This comes out strongest in his response to Franklin, where he is educating and defending *Star Trek*'s canon, perhaps against the impression that a fan published book (perhaps slash) could be considered official *Star Trek*.

Cordiality is reflected in Matthew's response to Albert's humorous Klingon suggestion. Matthew takes Albert's comment and extends it, creating a few snippets of dialog that he offers up to the community hoping that they will find it funny and consequently think of him as humorous and clever. This attempt at humor draws our attention to the affiliative needs being expressed and fulfilled through the newsgroup. These are *Star Trek* fans reaching out to one another to exchange information, opinions, and ideas about *Star Trek*. They are forming a type of "local" community, but they are also jockeying for status, correcting and teaching each other, joking, and building friendly bonds. Their text is not only purely information but also constantly seeking social exchange. The text echoes conversational rituals that are also enacted in F2F communications at fan clubs, convention halls, and in small group gatherings of fans.

In this one posting, the four fans are concerned with timelines, with the official status of story lines, with copyright own-

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ership, with continuity of characters and plot realism, and with the authentic history of the show, as well as with impressing others, exhibiting knowledge and mastery, competing, joking, correcting, and establishing rules and interpretations. It fascinates me to think of the concerns of those early cybernauts and see how similar they are to many of the concerns of *Star Trek* fans today.

From one posting, above, we learn about the communal, ritual practices of *Star Trek* fans, some of their central concerns, linguistic shortcuts, and conversational conventions. What should be quite noticeable is how much knowledge of *Star Trek*'s cultural models is required for a detailed, accurate translation of this posting. Add in several hundred or a thousand other postings, and you have a major interpretive task. However, it is one that will yield large amounts of information about the operations, rituals, language, and concerns of this brand tribe and its related media and science fiction consumption culture. The knowledge required for this interpretation extends to sources outside of the online e-tribe virtual community of consumption context, into a broader examination of fandom itself.

For my research (see Kozinets, 2001), I joined a local *Star Trek* fan club, got onto their Board of Directors, went to their meetings, helped to plan a Science Fiction and Media convention, attended seven *Star Trek* and Fan Media conventions across North America, read *Star Trek* magazines, read *Star Trek* books, watched *Star Trek* and other science fiction television shows, interviewed hundreds of fans, took hundreds of pictures, set up my own "*Star Trek* research web page" offering information and questions, communicated with over 60 *Star Trek* fans from around the world by email, and also examined all of the information I could find online in web pages and on bulletin boards (in 1995 there were no blogs as such).

The type and depth of information that I gathered from online sources into the lived experience of *Star Trek*'s culture offered different types of valuable data than that offered by focus groups, one-on-one interviews, or traditional quantitative techniques. The main advantage was that I was gathering experiential, naturalistic, and interactional information from newsgroups and private bulletin boards. These were naturally occurring conversations, not primed focus group interviews, not

one-on-one querying. It was in some way as if I was performing an ethnography, but was wearing my invisibility jacket.

Unlike a survey, an interview, or a focus group, the consumers provided this information without researcher elicitation. It was also free of charge. When I wanted detailed, personal information, I turned to online interviews conducted by email with 65 informants from over 20 countries around the world. This global emphasis was powerful, and the types of disclosures and the depth of knowledge and experience I gained from these ongoing interactions with people were invaluable. Interpreted carefully, and used pragmatically, this information would be extremely helpful to brand managers and marketers seeking to communicate with members of the *Star Trek* culture in their own language and using their own terms.

New-product and service ideas could be sourced from the style and content of these messages to enhance fans' desire for community and mastery. For example, the fans in this posting enjoyed "ripping" on the movies for their continuity conundrums. A book that pointed out these logical errors might appeal to them. Similarly, the concern about official series "canon" is highly important to fans; there is room for a volume discussing *Star Trek* canon, what it is, and perhaps even the fan debates surrounding it (a need that is still, to my knowledge, unfulfilled). Even in 1984, fan internet access and bulletin board use suggested the need to provide more customized for-profit services for fans, such as specialized fan chat rooms, targeted online videogame and role-playing access, online conventions, and *Star Trek* fan dating services; in the ensuing period, several of these new services have already been profitably launched.

To dip for a moment into another netnographic study, I also looked at coffee

culture online. That study revealed much about the language and concerns of coffee culture members. In particular, it revealed one of the essences of the culture to be the quasi-religious devotion that core members of the online coffee culture have to experiencing the perfect shot of espresso, which is idealized as "the god shot." The passionate, literate, religious metaphors that these coffee connoisseurs use online are, I believe, less likely to emerge in a focus group or an interview. Similarly, in survey work it is unlikely that these sorts of poetic cultural emanations would be entered as an answer to an open-ended question about "other comments on coffee." The sanctity of the coffee bean is, by virtue of its very sanctity, something that one is less likely to discuss with "outsiders" (these insider-outsider distinctions are common throughout all consumption-based cultures, as well as cultures and communities in general). Yet these are powerful terms and realizations that could guide the development of advertising copy targeted to the inner circle of coffee culture—and probably to its larger periphery, who looks to the inner circle as lead users and opinion leaders. In its communications with consumers, Starbucks focuses on a utopian, experiential awakening that is very different from the more embodied and caffeine-centered advertising message of Maxwell House or Folger's. However, netnographic research suggests taking these experiential overtones to the next level (see Kozinets, 2002 for details on new positioning and product and service innovations in the coffee industry suggested by netnographic study). Having outlined the potential of the method, I turn in the concluding section to offering some guidelines about the judgment of quality netnography and how it can usefully be applied in the world of advertising.

VIRTUAL VIEWERS, VIRTUAL CONSUMERS, VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Some of the most important standards of quality in ethnographic methodology are immersive depth, prolonged engagement, researcher identification, and persistent conversations. Careful netnography can also achieve all of these aims, but this is a methodological objective not to be taken lightly. I initially spent 20 months in the field for my *Star Trek* ethnography-netnography—but this research has continued, on-and-off, for over a decade. My coffee culture netnography took place over 33 months of sporadic reading, downloading, posting, roasting, and tasting.

A netnographer must attend to the goal of a complete immersion in the phenomenon, just as must an ethnographer. The netnographer must immerse him or herself in the culture, whether they must become a wine connoisseur, a videogame expert, or a food aficionado. They must read beyond the postings, meet people, and go places in their fleshy F2F bodies as well as in their virtual avatar selves. They must be fluent in language and in cultural understanding. They must take the time to let the culture truly seep into them, so that they can speak with authority, as John Schouten and Jim McAlexander can speak to Harley management about the intricacies of Harley's consumption subculture (see Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). They must feel themselves to be members of the culture and community they study. Moreover, a higher standard, they must be accepted as a member by the culture they study. They must cultivate key informants, persist in conversations with them, and use them as guides and as checks on accuracy and understanding.

This intimate level of cultural understanding is still a rarity in the world of advertising, copywriting, and marketing. It suggests new models of approaching

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what we do as marketing professionals. The communicative function becomes blurred with a type of ambassadorial role, a blending of consumer understanding and marketer understanding; like the old adage of managing by walking around (MBWA), it is marketing to the tribe by walking in the 'consumers' moccasins; through it, the marketer becomes both an immigrant and a stranger in her own house.

The payoff could be considerable. Consumers endlessly discuss what is important to them, and this attribute information can easily be fed into other models that help to understand attribute sets and choice models. They discuss their preferences, both in terms of products and brands. They gripe about functionality and form. They discuss new products that they would like to see, identifying white space for product development.

Consumers also self-select into certain groups. Newsgroups and blogs are endlessly spinning off from one another and attracting followings. These naturally occurring fragmentations can be guidelines for informed, grassroots-up segmentation strategies. Consumers also endlessly discuss and debate the meanings of brands and products, offering up a wealth of information about their perceptions and accrued meanings. They talk about brand differences, advertising honesty, and their own beliefs, setting the stage for examinations of positioning strategy.

Advertising is strange business. According to Kover (1995), much of the inspirational insight included in a particular

advertisement occurs in a working through of the copywriter's assumptions about the consumer audience, or the internalized "other." "If the other as the ideal viewer makes a positive emotional connection with the advertising idea, the writer believes the advertising will then communicate with the 'virtual viewer' (to whom the writer thinks he or she is writing out there)" (Kover, 1995, p. 602). In this article, I suggest that this "virtual viewer" could indeed be a "virtual consumer" in the netnographic sense. The resulting inspirational insight could be magnified and grounded in genuine consumer culture, instead of internalized assumption.

In a world where the mainstream has fragmented into myriad cultures, subcultures, and communities, understanding the particular language and customs of the tribe is the only way to meaningfully communicate with them. We have many examples of stereotyping, derogatory misrepresentation, and misapprehended cultures based upon internalized assumptions about the "other," and not nearly as many of genuine understanding. Used wisely and carefully, netnography can inform marketing and advertising on the deeply purposeful and meaningful, communally interactive, flesh-and-bones experience of consumption. It can illuminate motives, hopes, fears, and dreams, in a way that fully allows and attends to the unexpected and the real. In the right hands, it can reveal the human face of the brand, the footprints in the retail channel, the chuckle or the scoff at the advertisement or the sign. As another tool, simple on the sur-

face yet stubbornly difficult to use to full potential, it offers a new window on the naturally occurring, rich and complex world of lived consumption. **JAR**

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