ASSOCIATION FOR NETNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

NETNOCON 2025

THE GLOBAL NETNOGRAPHY CONFERENCE

NETNOCON 2025 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

"Let's Get Creative!"

Marseille, France, May 28-30th 2025



KEDGE BUSINESS SCHOOL

NETNOCON 2025 is organized by the Association for Netnographic Research and hosted by KEDGE Business School, through the Center of Excellence Marketing & New Consumption and KEDGE Arts School.

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NETNOCON 2025 Conference

Theme **Let’s Get Creative!**

In 2015, the **Netnography: Redefined** book merged the idea of arts-based research with qualitative data analysis and representation in netnography.

Recommending new techniques such as imagining, visual abstraction, and “artifying”, the book recommended a variety of creative techniques for both understanding and representing netnographic research.

Ten years later, netnographers from around the world will meet in Marseille to explore, share, and discuss the experimental creative expressions that allow them to blend their science with art. At this Netnocon, we encourage presenters to study creativity and creative industries topics, analyze creatively, and imaginatively present and represent their research by combining a variety of forms and formats of research. These forms include poetry, videography, visual arts, music, storytelling, mythology, mask, plays, and limitless other cultural forms.

Our host city, Marseille, a cosmopolitan city, a door on the Mediterranean civilization, exudes creative energy that has been sizzling for centuries. Artistic legacy is evident in the prestigious modern art history of the Provence and French Riviera Region. Today, the city produces cultural content in various creative industries such as street and urban art, rap music, music festivals, fashion industry, movie industry, sport, and tourism.

A growing creative economy, fuelled by new companies and innovation hubs in digital arts, design, and media, adds to its magnetism. The city offers major hybrid cultural third places such as La Friche de la Belle de Mai, the very first one launched in France in the 80’s. The city's designation as the 2013 European Capital of Culture reinforced its creative spirit further, attracting artists from far and wide.

Incorporating all of these elements, Netnocon’s 2025 theme will emphasize Marseille’s rich counterculture full of creative vibes, making it an ideal location to explore themes at the intersection of arts, popular culture, creative industries, and technology.

NETNOCON 2025 CONFERENCE

CHAIR & CO-CHAIRS



Chair

Professor Robert V. Kozinets develops methods and theories that are widely used around the world. His work aims to provide a human-centered understanding of technocultures as well as the social structures and passions that surround them. Netnography, his major innovation, is transforming research practices throughout industry and across the social sciences.



Co-Chair

Dr. Ulrike Gretzel is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Public Relations, University of Southern California and Director of Research at Netnografica. She has over 15 years of experience conducting academic and practice-focused netnographies, with topics ranging from the experiences of black vanlifers to the collective activism among fans of a Chinese TV drama.



Co-Chair

Rossella Gambetti is professor of branding and consumer culture at Labcom, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. Her research focuses on emerging technocultural phenomena shaping contemporary branding and consumer culture. Rossella is a “netno-enthusiast” who conducted several netnographic explorations in the social media worlds.



Co-Chair

Aleksej Heinze is Associate Professor of Marketing at Kedge Business School. His work spans Digital Transformation, Digital Pedagogy, including Sustainable Digital Marketing and using digital transformation to build robust institutions to combat corruption.



Co-Chair

Maud Derbaix is Associate Professor of Marketing at Kedge Business School, France and Head of the Expertise Centre Creative Industries and Culture. Her research focuses on consumer behavior in the context of artistic and cultural activities, in particular music, cinema, live performances and heritage.



Co-Chair

Gregorio Fuschillo is Associate Professor of Marketing at Kedge Business School. His research interests focus on consumer culture, fandom studies, morality in the marketplace, and brands. His work has been published in journals such as Marketing Theory, Journal of Business Ethics, European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Consumer Culture, and Revue Française de Gestion.



Co-Chair

Anne Gombault is Full Professor of strategic management and Director of Kedge Arts School at Kedge Business School. Her research covers organizational identity, behavior, strategy and marketing of arts, culture, and creative industries in general. Her work has been published in France and internationally in academic journals and books.



Co-Chair

Romas Malevicius, Assistant Professor of Marketing (Lecturer) at King's College London, UK, is a digital artist passionate about marketing, sustainability, and education for sustainability (EfS). He is a business consultant with 10 years of experience in business and management education and community engagement.



Co-Chair

Lena Cavusoglu is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Pacific University, US. Her research delves into transformative consumer research and consumer culture theory, with a particular focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in marketing practices. She examines these issues within creative industries, including media (advertising, film, and social and digital media), entertainment, and fashion.

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Day 1 – 28th of May

Session 1: Netnography expanded

The Netnographic Phenomenon: Analyzing Its Growth from Niche Method to Academic Brand

Bernard Cova, Richard Huaman-Ramirez, Aleksej Heinze

KEDGE Business School, Marseille, France

Abstract

The term ‘netnography’ initially emerged in a scientific article in 1997, pertaining to a study of online communities of X-Files fans (Kozinets, 1997). Subsequently, the method has been applied and developed to account for what happened in other online subcultures. Over the years, the term “netnography” has evolved to refer to any study of digital tribes and consumer communities via ethnographic research conducted online. Twenty-seven years after its first appearance, several scholars “have diverged from the original intentions of netnography… and this has resulted in a dilution and diversification of the principles of netnography” (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018, p. 670). What are the impacts of the alleged dilution and diversification of netnography?

To tackle this broad question, we conducted email interviews with twelve experts in netnography and qualitative digital ethnographic methods. We encouraged them to express their views on the current state of netnography. Participants were selected based on their publication records in netnographic research and their experience with various adaptations of the approach.

First result: One of the key developments in netnography in the last five years, as highlighted by one of our experts, is that it ‘... lies in the immersion of the researcher in the research, which is solidified by the immersion journal and its use in the research.’ The use of these journals reflects core practices of qualitative researchers, enabling netnographers to produce immersion notes, foster self-reflection, and ensure rigor and transparency.

Second result: Currently, netnography represents a strong brand rather than only a method. One of our experts observed that “there is a tendency for some social media researchers to call their study netnography without really being ethnographical or following netnography or citing the body of netnography literature”.

This remark illustrates the dominance of the academic brand that NETNOGRAPHY has established, beyond just consolidating several digital qualitative methods into a singular approach. The primary concern, then, is more about solidifying and enhancing the NETNOGRAPHY brand, rather than engaging in 'backyard battles' to safeguard narrow domains of influence or shield certain digital qualitative methods from being overshadowed by the brand. It is widely acknowledged that strong brands are ones that permit multiple interpretations and meanings, which is the foundation of NETNOGRAPHY.

What guidance may be offered to future researchers? Be mindful of the brand—since it is subject to several interpretations. Despite Kozinets’ influence, the original method has evolved into a more flexible

approach. NETNOGRAPHY is a powerful concept and a set of methods that can be applied across various research contexts.

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Netnography as a support to the study of alien and invasive species': the story of *Carpobrotus*

Hanna Möller, Emanuele Mancini, Lucia Fanini

University of Salento, Lecce, Italy

Abstract

The dissemination of non-indigenous species (NIS) and invasive organisms is a complex phenomenon, driven by several vectors and underlying factors. One such vector is the aesthetic appeal of the species to humans (Hayes et al., 2023). As with other invasive species, however, the effects of invasion on the ecosystem need to be specifically assessed. To this end, new records and areal expansion of NIS are traditionally done through reports from researchers or citizen scientists (Encarnação et al., 2021). Aesthetically attractive invasive species may instead offer another level of analysis, related to the hedonistic values of society and the voluntary use/diffusion of such species by humans. Our study intends to use netnography to integrate NIS spread with qualitative societal attitudes towards the pretty, invasive species. Our target is along the coastlines of Italy, the genus *Carpobrotus* (https://www.iucngisd.org/gisd/speciesname/carpobrotus+edulis), a plant covering seaside dunes, with eye-catching flowers blooming in April-May. We investigated two main visual-based environments: Instagram and iNaturalist, possibly reaching two different attitudinal groups of users, targeting the background knowledge and attitudes of users posting pictures of *Carpobrotus* spp. We applied the approach after Kozinets (2024) on posts that actually depicted the plant in question, along with hashtags that referenced both scientific and vernacular names. Via mobile device, questionnaires were distributed to 100 users out of 127 posts (avoiding multiple posts) on Instagram, and 51 users out of 61 on iNaturalist. Data were gathered and analysed manually. Notes describing the posts were kept in a spreadsheet.

Even though the plant is perennial, 93.7% of posts depicted blooms (Fig. 1). Often pictures were connected to #naturalflora. Answers'rate to the questionnaire were roughly 5% for Instagram, and 20% for iNaturalist, where by chance a friend participated. Out of the respondents the majority (13) was between 26-65 years old. Most Instagram users knew that the plant was invasive though they focused on the aesthetic appeal of the flowers, the connection with the beginning of summer and seaside holidays, while iNaturalist users intended to raise awareness about invasive species. Respondents were surprisingly aware of the invasiveness of the plant though the aesthetic and recreational values overcome the possible consequences on local biodiversity. While studies have highlighted difficulties in identifying alien species among younger generations (Remmele and Lindemann-Matthies, 2024),

here participants demonstrated sufficient literacy, but did not question the environmental impacts nor the cascading effects of their posts.

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Let's Get Creative! Transformative Netnography in the Study of Tourism in Historical Cities

Aleksandra Powierska, Ewa Bogacz-Wojtanowska, Krzysztof Loska, Sylwia Wrona

Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland

Abstract

At the beginning of December 2024, the implementation of the project 'SCT HUB - Codesign the Future of Sustainable Cultural Tourism' financed by the European Urban Initiative program began. The project leader is the Municipality of Kraków, and one of the partners is a research team from the Faculty of Management and Social Communication of the Jagiellonian University. As members of this team, we are responsible for designing methodology and conducting netnographic research consistent with the project's goal of sustainable development of cultural tourism in Kraków.

Given the above, the presentation will aim to present the results of the first phase of the pilot and conceptual research, as a result of which a scheme of the research process based on netnography in the participatory action research paradigm (Kozinets, Cavusoglu, Belk 2024) with particular emphasis on art-based research (Kozinets 2015) will be created. The presented process will be an element of the designed overall methodology and will show the location and importance of netnography in a broader context. Our main task is to identify problems related to sustainable tourism in Krakow and answer the question: what solutions can be implemented in the area of organizing cultural events?

Netnographic research will be conducted primarily on Facebook and is intended to proceed in two directions:

- through official social media profiles selected for the study of cultural events
- within a group created specifically for the project, to which all project stakeholders, including artists, will be invited. This group is also intended to be a space for experimenting with art-based research.

The aim of netnographic research is primarily to understand the needs and behaviors of stakeholders selected to study cultural events, to learn about their opinions, and to create a space for exchanging experiences that will accompany the living lab created by other partners as part of the project. Both directions assume keeping an immersive journal.

The 'SCT HUB-Codesign the Future of Sustainable Cultural Tourism' project is a pioneering initiative, being the first of its kind implemented in Poland. Since we are writing this abstract at the beginning of the project, during the conference, we will share the first results of the pilot studies, a proposed concept of methodological model for netnography research, and ethical implications that will appear at this stage.

Form of presentation: Comic Book

References:

Kozinets, Robert; Cavusoglu, Lena; Belk, Russell (2024). "Transformative Netnography: Combining Representation, Social Media, and Participatory Action Research." In: Proceedings of the 57th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. pp. 2298-2307. HICSS.

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The digitalization of ethnography between possibility and threat

Angela Delli Paoli, Valentina D'Auria

University of Salerno, Salerno, Italy

Abstract

The paper explores the digital transposition of ethnography. The opening of ethnography to digital social spaces takes different forms under several different labels: Netnography (Kozinets, 1998); Digital Ethnography (Murthy, 2008; Varis, 2014; Lane & Lingel, 2022), Virtual Ethnography (Hine, 2008), Cyber Ethnography (Escobar, 1994; Morton, 2001), Webnography (Puri, 2007), Ethnography of Virtual Spaces (Burrel, 2009), Ethnography of the virtual world (Boellstoorff et al., 2012), Internet Ethnography (Boyd, 2008), Ethnography on the Internet (Beaulieu, 2004), Internet-related ethnography (Postill & Pink, 2012); Expanded ethnography (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). The differences in terminology sometimes also imply differences in how this digital research approach is conceptualised.

Kozinets & Gretzel (2023) argue that these variations reflect deeper ontological and epistemological differences in how researchers conceptualize online interactions. Virtual ethnography often views digital interactions as partial representations of offline realities, necessitating additional in-person observations. Netnography, by contrast, considers online interactions as cultural phenomena in their own right. This shift in perspective has significant implications for how researchers define fieldwork, ethical considerations, and the validity of online data.

An internally diverse array of approaches emerges from the empirical application of netnography. Differences emerge concerning the research field (contextual fields: blogs, forums and communities VS decontextualized narratives aggregated through tags or hashtags), access to the field (covert or overt), types of observations (lurking, passive observation, simulated observation, participant observation, auto-netnography) and data analysis (text analysis VS hermeneutics; inductive VS deductive). The paper investigates such an array of approaches through a systematic literature review of the existing digital ethnographic research to map methodological differences. The research process follows four key steps: search, selection, analysis and synthesis. In the search phase, papers are searched iteratively

in Web of Science and Scopus by using different keywords and criteria. In the selection phase, the research is confined to those studies with an empirical focus, specifically which adopts an empirical netnographic research (1370 papers). The analysis phase is performed through a hybrid content analysis of the papers based on the sequential use of deductive and inductive coding. Figure 1 shows some of the results that emerged from the analysis focusing on field types and observation types.

Although first efforts to summarise some of the contributions relating to the method exist (Bengry-Howell et al., 2012, Wiles et al., 2013; Tunçalp & Lê, 2014; Bartl et al., 2016; Costello et al., 2017; Addeo et al. 2020; Delli Paoli, D'Auria, 2021), a profound literature review of research practices is still lacking.

We aim to provide a systematic literature review to understand how, why and in which ways netnography modifies the concept of fieldwork, the observational method and the data analysis:

- What does it mean to bring the digital to established practices of ethnography?
- Which core claims about ethnography the digital imposes to rethink and in which ways?

Resisting the urge to reduce culture and humanity to decontextualized numbers while expanding the range and depth of data appears to be the main challenge of digital ethnography.

Keywords: netnography; ethnography; digital social research; systematic literature review

Session 2: Brandscapes

Wanted dead or alive! Brand longevity and the kairological consumer timework

Jagannath Sanyal, Gregorio Fuschillo

Kedge Business School, Marseille, France

Abstract

Brand longevity is an increasingly important topic in consumer research as it raises crucial questions on the relation between the past, the present and the future. Brand longevity is also important because it lies at the intersection of time, social salience and consumers' engagement towards serial brands such as James Bond (Preece et al., 2019). Although research in consumer culture has shown the role of consumer timework in connecting the past, the present and the future for the sake of consumers' identity (Robinson et al., 2021); it remains still hard to understand why consumers struggle to keep some brands such as celebrities alive even after the end of their career and their death. Why do consumers keep their loved stars alive? Answering this question is important because it could provide further insights into the understanding of the role of consumer timework in the longevity of some brands. To answer this question, we conducted a netnographic investigation (Kozinets and Gambetti, 2021) of #JohnLennon, a widespread online conversation. We collected 460 pages-ongoing of single spaced of online data from Instagram. Our preliminary results unveil a particular form of consumer timework that we define kairological timework.

Time unfolds in two main dimensions, chronos and kairos (Smith, 1969). Chronos (chronological time) is the evolution in the physical extension that "measures the duration, the length, and the age of an identifiable body or event. Research in consumer culture mostly relies on the chronological dimension of timework that is how consumer practices, objects and activities link the past, the present and the future (Robinson et al., 2022). Conversely, Kairos points to the special position (era) that an event or action occupies in a series, when something appropriately happens that cannot happen at 'any time', but only at 'that time', to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur" (Smith, 1969, 1).

Our preliminary results show that consumers engage with the brand by: making it present through commemorations; re-stating its meanings (peace, unity, no-violence); showcasing resonance with their own life experiences. Through the kairological timework consumers maintain the John Lennon brand visible and alive over time from the past to the present. In contrast to the chronological timework that underlies a relation to temporality, the kairological timework relates to the era, that is reproducing the "right time", the one embodied by Lennon's messages, and have an impact on the current time. In turn, the brand gains in renewed visibility over time thanks to consumer engagement and its renewed social salience.

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Netnographic Analysis of Brand and Celebrity Implications in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Roumaissa Sabeur Cherif

Kedge Business School, Paris, France

Abstract

In today's digital world, brands and celebrities face growing scrutiny when addressing politically sensitive issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This study examines how brand positioning during military conflicts affects consumer behavior, trust, and financial sustainability. It explores how public figures engage with or avoid such topics and the consequences.

This study focuses on Instagram as the primary data source, using symbolic netnographic analysis covering posts, comments, likes, hashtags, and user-generated content from brands, celebrities, activists, and news outlets. **The research spans October 2023 to May 2024, analyzing Instagram comments in three languages.** Online news articles complement social media data, while hashtags like #Blockout2024, #BoycottAdidas, and #BDS are tracked to uncover activism patterns, backlash, and communication strategies.

A keyword-driven method using Ahrefs, AnswerThePublic, and Talkwalker identifies key themes, hashtags, and influential accounts. The study categorizes brand and celebrity responses (statements, silence, comment restrictions) and consumer reactions (pro-boycott, anti-boycott, neutral). 150 Instagram posts and 1,500 comments were analyzed, alongside press releases and news reports.

Findings show that consumers demand consistency in brand messaging. Any inconsistencies or perceived insincerity can spark a backlash, leading to a loss of trust. The concept of "conflict ambassadorship" emerged, where supporting one cause pressures brands and celebrities to take stances on others. While silence is criticized, taking a stance also results in backlash, as seen in the boycott lists.

Counter-narratives exist within online discussions. Some challenge the effectiveness of boycotts, while others defend targeted brands. Notably, activist groups on opposing sides often co-opt the same hashtags, such as #BoycottAdidas, blurring activism's intent. The study reveals that social media discourse is not just an echo chamber but a space where debates shape brand reputation and consumer engagement.

When they respond, brands clarify their positions through alternative channels. Many limit engagement on Instagram, opting instead for press releases or websites. For instance, Starbucks countered rumors about military funding with an official statement on its website.

Social media amplifies activism, yet brands often turn off comments during controversies, shifting debates to activist sub-accounts and forums, reinforcing echo chambers. However, boycotts have also created opportunities for emerging brands that capitalize on shifting consumer preferences.

Long-term consumer memory matters. Whether brands took a pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, or neutral stance, they all faced criticism. However, those with consistent messaging were less accused of hypocrisy. Once backlash occurs, recovery is difficult, as consumers often remain unforgiving.

Users modify words (e.g., ‘Isr@el’) to navigate censorship and hashtags to rally communities, fueling a digital “attention war.”

Intersectionality plays a role in activism. Social movements, such as LGBTQ+ rights, increasingly intersect with geopolitical discourse, as seen with #QueersForPalestine, countering Israeli pinkwashing accusations.

This study emphasizes the importance of authenticity, coherence, and proactive communication in brand and celebrity activism. It explores how digital movements shape consumer perception by using symbolic netnography (Kozinets, 2015) and theories on consumer activism and boycotts (Klein, Smith & John, 2004; Friedman, 1999). While authentic engagement builds trust, performative activism risks backlash, providing insights for navigating advocacy in a polarized digital landscape.

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Exploring the Negative Growth of an Episodic Brand through Brand Hate

Malik Husnain Arshad, Sonia Kanwal, Hirudini Cooray

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Abstract

Introduction and Aim:

This study aims to explore the role of brand hate in growing the brand negatively. The context of the study is Amazon's TV show ‘*Rings of Power’*. The show is accused of not staying true to Tolkien’s fantasy world, and this manifests in creation of an alternate brand imaginary by the audience. This study uses brand public theory to explore the alternate brand imaginary shaped by brand hate.

Literature Review:

Existing literature has focused on brand growth in two major directions (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Giesler, 2012; Minocher, 2019). One is the growth of the brand in a positive direction, where consumers co-created value for the brand along with its parent company (Cova & Pace, 2006; Schöps et al., 2020). On the other hand, brands also grow negatively (Cova & D’Antone, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2021). These types of growth have been explored in different social formations like brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) and brand public (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).On brand publics audience can grow the brand negatively. This growth is evident in destabilisation of brand assemblage by disgruntled fans (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015),erosion of brand value by ordinary users of the brand (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). This study argues that on occasions underlying the negative growth lies brand hate, thus emphasising the role of brand hate in meaning-making. The role of brand hate meaning-making remains

under-explored. Recently brand hate's role in negative growth of the brand in brand within brand communities has been discussed (Brandão & Popoli, 2022; Dessart & Cova, 2021), however, this remains to be explored on the brand public. This study takes inspiration from Parmentier and Fischer (2015) destabilisation of episodic brands and further extends this study by adding the role of brand hate within this destabilisation of assemblage or the growth of a brand in a negative way through brand hate.

Objective of the Study

Objective 1: To explore how brand hate influences the consumption of episodic brands, with a focus on The Rings of Power.

Objective 2: To examine how brand hate contributes to the creation of negative brand imaginaries and fosters negative brand growth.

The Methodology:

The study focuses on eight YouTube Vloggers, who are mostly die-hard Tolkien fans or fans of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings Trilogy, who create video content with which they review Amazon's Ring of Power episodes. The data collected is both textual and visual the textual is collected through download transcripts of the YouTube videos and subsequent comments. The visual data is collected by saving screenshots. The textual data is analysed by using reflexive thematic analysis subscribed by Clarke et al. (2015) . Visual analysis is done by using techniques subscribed by Caliandro and Anselmi (2021).

Potential Contribution

Potential contribution is to brand as a means of consumption and brand hate as a tool for creating negative brand imaginary. Thus, showing brand hate drives both consumption and brand meaning-making.

Keywords: Brand Hate, Brand Public, Brand Imaginary, Netnography

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Exploring Contagiousness of Brand Hate on Brand Public

Malik Arshad

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Abstract

Introduction and Aim

This study aims to explore the different movements of brand hate on brand publics. Brand hate is conceptualised as a compendium of negative emotions that are felt and expressed towards the brand (Yadav and Chakrabarti 2022). Brand publics is defined as an online media space, where brand related content is generated and accumulated through mediation devices like Twitter hashtags (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). This study monitors the movement of brand hate from hated to brand to other stakeholders. Thus contributing to brand hate literature by highlighting its fluidity.

Methodology

This study employs netnography to address the research aims, building on the common use of netnographic methods in exploring anti-consumption within consumer culture studies (Brandão and Popoli 2022; Cova and White 2010; Dessart and Cova 2021; Gambetti and Biraghi 2023; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Popp et al. 2016). The initial phase involved selecting H&M as the focal brand, chosen after a thorough evaluation process that shortlisted leading brands based on size and market dominance (Kucuk 2008). H&M, as a prominent brand in the fast fashion industry, was expected to attract more instances of brand hate, given the negative double jeopardy effect.

The chosen social media platforms for data collection were YouTube and Twitter, aligning with the passionate expressions found on these platforms (Kozinets 2019) . YouTube videos featuring anti-H&M

content were selected, and their transcripts, along with comments, were obtained using VOSON and Google API key. For Twitter, thirty-five search queries were developed using negative terms and expressions associated with H&M, drawing from previous studies (Mondal et al. 2017) and identification of negative emotion expressions on anti-brand websites (Kucuk, 2008). The data collected spanned from 2016 to 2022, covering major H&M controversies related to racism, greenwashing, copyright infringement, and more.

Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method was applied to analyse the collected data, aiming to identify patterns and themes related to anti-consumption dynamics directed at H&M.

Finding and Discussion

The finding revealed five different movements. These first movement was from brand to the user of the of brand. This included the consumer who shopped at H&M. Thus, showing brand hate transforms into hate for the users of the brand. The second movement was from the brand to its collaborators. This was for Sabyasachi as they partnered with H&M. The third was from t H&M to the celebrities that endorsed it like David Beckham and Billie Ellish. The fourth movement was across similar for example from H&M to other fast fashion competitors like Zara, Primark, Old Navy etc. The fifth movement was from the brand to the social media influencers that partner with brand or use it as a vehicle of publicity. The sixth movement is onto those who express brand hate, for example the haters of brand themselves become the subject, which is expressed by those who defend the hatred brand. The figure 1 below depicts the contagious quality of brand hate.

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Session 3: Netnographic explorations of variegated influencers

From Algorithms to Affluence: Finfluencers and Contemporary Wealth Narratives on Social Media

Adrienne Watson[1], Ana Javornik[1], Sven Molner[1], Mario Campana[2]

[1]University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom. [2]University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom

Abstract

In today's fast-evolving economic environment, ideas of wealth are quickly changing for many. Recent advancements in fintech and digital platforms have created new ways to build wealth online and widened access to investing. These innovations are exemplified by finfluencers (financial influencers) on social media, who share engaging snippets of financial advice, and promises of wealth creation from investing in innovative financial offerings, with mostly Gen Z followers, whilst profiting from their monetised content and courses. Changes in wealth accumulation pave the way for new wealth meanings, but a current understanding of wealth is unaccounted for within the digital economy. To examine this, our study explores how finfluencers leverage social media platforms to shape contemporary notions of wealth. To achieve this aim, we conduct a netnography on TikTok and Instagram social media content of 15 finfluencers within sub-genres of property investment, trading, financial literacy, and cryptocurrency. Drawing upon Foucault's governmentality theory, our findings show that finfluencers communicate three self-focused wealth narratives: self-actualisation, self-assurance, and self-sufficiency. These narratives demonstrate that wealth creation is internalised through a subjectification process. Thus, finfluencers use wealth as a governance mechanism to subjectify their followers by integrating institutional shifts, fintech, and discourse, within their social media content. Significantly, the wealth narratives reinforce neoliberal ideals surrounding financial success by framing wealth acquisition as an individual pursuit of self-enhancement. Therefore, this study contributes to literature on wealth and identity formation, as one's ability to obtain wealth is framed by finfluencers as being under their direct control, removing structural barriers. This study also extends influencer marketing literature, addressing their cultural and economic power, by demonstrating how new online intermediaries (finfluencers) shape wealth meanings to persuade desired audience interactions.

Keywords: Finfluencers, Social Media, Influencer marketing, Wealth, Gen Z

Virtual Influencers in Türkiye: A Comparative Study of Meaning-Mirroring and Meaning-Shaping Interactions

Sema Misci Kip, S. Özkan

Izmir University of Economics, İzmir, Turkey

Abstract

Virtual influencers (VIs) are an innovative trend in influencer marketing, using artificial intelligence (AI) to create digital personas that engage audiences on social media (Mirowska & Arsenyan, 2020; da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Bayçu & Artukarslan, 2023; Erdinç & Uzunçarşılı Soydaş, 2024). Many VIs have emerged, including Miquela and Imma, as well as brand-specific figures like Prada's Candy and

Ford Türkiye's Alin. Created by teams of content creators and technologists, VIs represent a shift from human-driven creativity to AI-generated outputs and are now seen as products of AI-driven creative industries.

Research has explored VIs' taxonomy and characteristics (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Engström, 2022; Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024), authenticity (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Liu & Lee, 2024), messages (Ameen et al., 2023; Igarashi et al., 2024), engagement (Stein et al., 2022; Carson et al., 2023; Melnychuk et al., 2024), and ethics (Robinson, 2020). Studies also compare different types of VIs on trust (Wan et al., 2024), emotional bond and social presence (Yan et al., 2024), and uncanniness and purchase behavior (Gutuleac et al., 2024).

VIs can generate strong user engagement, driven by factors like source credibility, parasocial interaction, and informational influence, contributing to follower loyalty (Melnychuk et al., 2024). However, audiences often feel ambivalent toward VIs due to blurred lines between virtuality and reality (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Studies suggest followers relate to VIs by comparing them to familiar concepts or characters (Bayçu & Artukarslan, 2023). Some VIs have avoided the "uncanny valley" effect, becoming appealing digital figures through strategic brand partnerships (Erdinç & Uzunçarşılı Soydaş, 2024).

Gambetti and Kozinets (2024) categorize VIs into four types: hyper-human, anti-human, pan-human, and alter-human. They classify hyper-human and anti-human VIs as "meaning-mirroring," while pan-human and alter-human VIs are "meaning-shaping." Meaning-mirroring VIs replicate the lifestyles and values of a target audience, whereas meaning-shaping VIs introduce new interpretations and values.

In Türkiye, IAMX ALARA is a hyper-human, meaning-mirroring VI managed by iamx.live. She is known for "10-minute talk-shows with ALARA X," where she interviews celebrities, reflecting lifestyles familiar to her audience. In contrast, Seren Ay (ai.serenay), a pan-human, meaning-shaping VI created by medusa.aigency, appeals mainly to teenagers with her "teacher" persona. Her messages about relationships, gender roles, and lifestyle choices influence her followers' perceptions and values.

This study builds on Gambetti and Kozinets (2024) by comparing IAMX ALARA and Seren Ay to examine whether their different communication styles lead to varied audience engagement. It focuses on their Instagram content, using immersion journals, notes, and a review of posts, visuals, captions, and comments.

Although VIs are growing in popularity in markets like Türkiye, they often struggle to maintain sustainability, as they are usually active for limited periods before disappearing. By analyzing the interactions of IAMX ALARA (active since 2020) and Seren Ay (since 2023), this study aims to provide insights into sustainable engagement strategies for VIs in the Turkish market. The findings are expected to enhance understanding of how communication styles influence user engagement, offering practical insights for brands and VIs.

Keywords: Virtual influencers, engagement, communication styles

Exploring #professorsontiktok: Scholars as Influencers

Martina Ladendorf[1], Ali Mohamed[2]

[1]Stockholm university, Stockholm, Sweden. [2]KTH, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

This study explores the emerging role of university professors on TikTok, examining their goals, communication styles, and strategies. Historically, the professor's role has been public, centered on sharing knowledge. The term professor originates from the Latin profitieri, meaning to declare publicly, highlighting the profession's role in knowledge dissemination. One point of departure for the analysis is Gramsci's (1971) understanding of the role of the intellectual to maintain or resist capitalist hegemony. TikTok complicates this function, operating within hegemonic capitalism while challenging U.S. internet dominance (Gray, 2021).

The research employs a netnographic approach to examine professor micro-influencers (10K+ followers). Guided by discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), the study explores two questions: What themes and content emerge in the professor's posts? How do these align with influencer roles and academia's current state? Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) provides an overarching view of dominant themes, complemented by in-depth content analysis. Among 17 creators, five we closely examined, focusing on themes of TikTok's potential ban, teaching, and research.

Preliminary findings suggest a predominance of humor content, aligned with TikTok trends, particularly slapstick pranks and darkly comedic reflections on life in academia. Here, the creators align with well-known formats on the app. Professors also positioned themselves as public educators, using their expertise in, for example, AI ethics, linguistics, and gender theory to critique social and political issues, something that is also common in the general TikTok feed. The public availability of this content could be seen as reminiscent of both the original meaning of the word 'professor' and Gramsci's theory of the organic intellectual. However, professors balance dual roles as researchers and educators while being commodified through the algorithms of TikTok and within academia under neoliberalism, facing pressures from both audit culture and industry expectations (Troiani & Dutson, 2021; Brown, 2017), thereby fulfilling the function of the traditional intellectual.This research contributes to understanding how social media intersects with academia, raising critical questions about the role of professors as digital influencers, the democratization of knowledge, and the implications of blending scholarly authority with influencer culture.

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UX Influencers: A Netnographic Qualitative Study on Human-Centered Design

Ali Mohamed

KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

This study examines how User Experience (UX) designers navigate challenges and develop strategies to promote human-centered design (HCD) principles, mainly empathy, inclusivity, and accessibility. Using a netnographic qualitative methodology, it investigates how UX professionals, particularly influencers, bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and real-world applications through social advocacy and professional practice. While empathy remains a foundational value in UX design, this study highlights persistent barriers, such as organizational resistance, limited accessibility training, and ethical concerns surrounding emerging technologies like AI. The research extends existing discussions by emphasizing the evolving role of UX professionals as practitioners and advocates for systemic change, influencing industry standards and shaping accessibility discourse. Findings suggest that accessibility remains under-prioritized despite its ethical and legal significance, necessitating proactive advocacy and structural reforms. By positioning UX influencers as key actors in the digital design landscape, this study contributes to the broader discourse on human-centered design, design ethics, and the intersection of social influence and digital accessibility.

Keywords: Human-centered design, HCI, UX design and research, Accessibility advocacy, Netnography

Introduction

The digital transformation reshapes human experiences, with UX (User Experience) professionals playing a central role in crafting inclusive, ethical, and human-centered designs. Beyond traditional usability and aesthetics, there is a growing emphasis on empathy as a cornerstone of design, fostering meaningful connections with diverse user groups. The research highlights the importance of integrating empathy-centric methodologies in industrial contexts to enhance stakeholder engagement and design outcomes (Rogers et al., 2023; Drouet et al., 2023). The role of UX professionals has expanded, necessitating collaboration across interdisciplinary teams to address complex challenges like those posed by emerging AI/ML technologies, which require balancing technical innovation with user-centric principles (Muralikumar & McDonald, 2024; Uusitalo et al., 2024). As advocates and thought leaders, UX influencers are increasingly tasked with guiding teams and organizations toward embracing human-centered principles. They face a dual responsibility: navigating the intricate demands of modern design processes and promoting inclusivity and accessibility, often overlooked in traditional design paradigms (Avadhana, 2024; Shukla et al., 24; Petrie et al., 2022). By focusing on these dimensions, UX practitioners improve product usability and address ethical concerns such as transparency and user autonomy, as highlighted in the discourse on persuasive versus manipulative design practices (Sánchez Chamoroet al., 2024). This study explores the experiences of UX influencers, using a netnographic qualitative approach to examine how they advocate for empathy, inclusivity, and ethical design. It aims to highlight their contributions, challenges, and the broader impact of their work in an evolving digital landscape. By drawing from narratives and theoretical frameworks such as human-centered design and empathy-centric approaches, this research bridges the gap between theoretical constructs and practical applications in UX design (Avadhana, 2024; Hordvik et al., 2023; Larusdottir et al., 2024). While previous research on human-centered design (HCD) and UX has focused on usability and interface optimization (Rogers et al., 2023), fewer studies have examined the social roles of UX influencers in shaping accessibility and empathy-driven design practices. This study extends the

conversation by using netnographic methods to investigate how UX influencers actively advocate for inclusivity, influence industry standards, and navigate organizational barriers. By highlighting their challenges and strategies, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of UX professionals as not only designers but also change agents in accessibility advocacy.

Aim and Research Questions

This study explores UX designers' key strategies and challenges in promoting human-centered design. It examines how their professional experiences bridge the gap between theoretical principles and real-world applications. By understanding their roles, practices, and advocacy efforts, this research highlights the contributions of UX designers in advancing human-centered design principles, emphasizing empathy, inclusivity, and accessibility within diverse organizational and technological contexts. This purpose is examined via two core questions:

1. What are UX designers' key strategies and challenges in promoting human-centered design?

2. How do UX designers leverage their professional experiences to bridge the gap between human-centered design principles and real-world applications?

This study uses a netnographic qualitative approach to investigate UX influencers' motivations, challenges, and impacts. Key findings highlight empathy as a guiding value, organizational resistance in advocacy, ethical considerations in AI integration, and the role of accessibility in design. The discussion explores how UX influencers shape the field through empathy, social influence, and ethical practices, concluding with contributions to UX and recommendations for future research.

Design Principles and Frameworks

This study is grounded in Human-Centered Design (HCD) theory, which emphasizes design with a deep understanding of user needs, values, and experiences. HCD aligns well with principles of empathy and inclusivity, encouraging designers to create solutions prioritizing cultural values. HCD is a design philosophy that prioritizes a deep understanding of human needs, values, and behaviors throughout the design and development process. It aims to create functional but also meaningful, inclusive, and empathetic solutions to the diverse contexts in which they are used. This approach aligns with principles of accessibility, usability, and ethical design, making it a cornerstone of modern design practices. At its essence, HCD ensures that users are central to every stage of the design process. As stated by ISO 9241-220:2019, "Human-centered design is an approach to system design and development that aims to improve usability, accessibility, and user experience while avoiding harm from use by focusing on the needs and capabilities of the users." This iterative approach involves user research, ideation, prototyping, and testing, ensuring that the resulting product effectively addresses user challenges and aligns with their expectations (ISO 9241-220:2019; Rogers et al., 2023; Lazar et al., 2017). Human-centered design is deeply interconnected with disciplines such as User Experience (UX) Design and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). While UX design emphasizes crafting seamless and enjoyable user experiences, HCI optimizes interactions between people and technology through principles drawn from computer science, psychology, and Design (Canziba, 2018; Lazar et al., 2017). Together, these fields contribute to creating systems that are functional, accessible, and user-friendly. Interaction Design (IxD), a subset of HCI, further enhances the application of HCD principles by focusing on meaningful and intuitive interactions between users and digital systems. By emphasizing users' behaviors, needs, and contexts, Interaction Design ensures that technology integrates seamlessly into everyday life (Rogers et al., 2023).

A defining feature of HCD is its commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. Designers strive to create solutions that cater to diverse abilities and contexts, ensuring compliance with standards like the Directive (2019). Accessibility not only benefits users with disabilities but also enhances the overall

usability and user satisfaction of the product. By embedding accessibility into the design process, HCD fosters equity in technology use and reduces barriers to digital interaction (Mohamed et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2023; Lazar et al., 2017; European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2019). As emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) become integral to modern systems, the relevance of HCD has grown. HCD principles ensure that these technologies empower users rather than alienate them, emphasizing ethical practices, transparency, and user control. This approach helps address critical design challenges in an increasingly digital and interconnected world (Canziba, 2018). HCD's emphasis on usability underscores its focus on creating effective, efficient, and satisfying systems. Ethical considerations are equally central, as designers are tasked with avoiding harm and prioritizing user well-being. By combining technical rigor with empathy and inclusivity, HCD ensures that the end product resonates with users while addressing their unique needs and values (Rogers et al., 2023; Lazar et al., 2017; ISO 9241-220:2019).

Netnography Qualitative Method

This study follows the principles of Netnography expounded by Kozinets (2020). Netnography is a qualitative research method derived from ethnography that examines social interactions within social media platforms. This study employs Netnography to examine UX influencers' activities, insights, and discussions across social media, online forums, and professional networks like LinkedIn. This approach allows a deeper understanding of influencers' thoughts, practices, and values. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with UX professionals, followed by an analysis of their online presence, posts, and interactions. Combining interview data and online observation enables a comprehensive view of how these influencers advocate for human-centered design. Netnography is a qualitative research method designed to gain cultural insights through the systematic, immersive, and multimodal analysis of observations, digital traces, and elicitations (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). It adheres to structured yet flexible research practices and guidelines, prioritizing researcher engagement, ethical considerations, and contextual consistency. This approach captures and interprets the meanings embedded in discourses, experiences, and interactions within digitally mediated environments (Kozinets, 2020; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). As a digital method emphasizing deep engagement and comprehensive data analysis, Netnography is uniquely equipped to identify emerging phenomena and foster reflexive thinking about potential alternative futures (Kozinets, 2022).

I use Netnography to understand UX influencers' perspectives by observing them on social media, i.e., what they write, sharing texts, videos, and other materials, and how they use the communicative tools offered in the current online environment to create influential content. I first followed UX/UI designers and researchers mainly on LinkedIn, but even on Facebook, Meetup, and X (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of participants and their active social media platforms

Influencers	Country	LinkedIn followers	Social media
16	Sweden some of them study or work in Sweden, but they are from Azerbaijan, India, Portugal	400–6000	LinkedIn, Facebook, Meetup, X (Twitter)

After that, I contacted them and asked for an online interview. UX influencers have various job titles, such as user experience/UX/UI designers and researchers, Product developers, accessibility experts, and advocates. UX Designer & Researcher, UI/UX Designer, Writer & Researcher, Expert in digital workplace issues, keynote speaker, Senior UX strategist, Usability professional, Head of UX, Product/UX Designer & Visual Creator, UX- & service designer.

The selection criteria included UX influencers engaging on social media about HCD/HCI. Before the interview, I obtained consent from all participants to record the conversation; then, the interviews were transcribed and anonymized. I then used thematic analysis because it offers a balance of simplicity and depth, making it a valuable method for qualitative research across various fields and contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; 2006).

Thematic analysis

This section presents a thematic analysis of 16 interviews with leading UX influencers–professionals influential in human-centered design. The analysis explores their expertise, challenges, and key contributions, showcasing their impact on advancing user-focused practices. The study identified six main themes: 1) Empathy as a core value in UX design, 2) Challenges of advocacy within organizational structures, 3) ethical considerations in the use of emerging technologies like AI, 4) Integrating accessibility as an essential UX practice, 5) Accessibility and Inclusivity as Cornerstones, and 6) The Evolution of UX Influencers. Each theme reflects the experiences and perspectives of the participants and highlights their approaches to promoting human-centered design.

1. **Empathy as a core value in UX design**

Empathy emerged as a fundamental value driving the work of UX influencers, informing their design choices and advocacy. Many participants emphasized empathy as a starting point for understanding diverse user needs, especially for those from marginalized or disabled groups. For instance, UX-3 discussed how empathy shapes her approach to designing for complex, multi-stakeholder projects, allowing her to address the nuanced needs of various users. Similarly, UX-10 described empathy as "seeing through the eyes of others," an approach he uses to ensure that design choices resonate with users' lived experiences. UX-7 brought a historical perspective to empathy in UX, discussing how early digital projects often ignored user needs, leading to stress and poor outcomes. He emphasized empathy as critical to designing systems that reduce stress and improve usability in workplace tools. UX-11 reflected on the empathy training gap during her studies, where she had to self-learn accessibility concepts that should have been a foundational part of her education. UX-1 highlights the role of empathy in understanding diverse user contexts and creating meaningful, user-focused solutions. UX-8 highlights that empathy enables the creation of designs that simplify complex user interactions while enhancing usability and engagement across diverse contexts.

The participants indicated empathy motivates them to challenge traditional design norms, particularly where such norms fail to account for inclusivity. By centering empathy in their work, these UX influencers seek to create more meaningful and inclusive digital products, aligning their design processes with broader human-centered design principles.

Empathy is a driver of UX success and a remedy for the systemic oversights in design that affect end users' well-being. These accounts expand the understanding of empathy in UX, showing it as a skill that bridges technical knowledge with human values.

2. **Challenges of advocacy within organizational structures**

Many participants expressed frustration with their organizational challenges when advocating for human-centered practices. They noted that UX is sometimes undervalued in corporate environments focused on rapid product development or revenue generation. UX-4, who leads a UX team in a rapidly growing company, shared how she initially encountered resistance when establishing user testing as a non-negotiable part of the product development process. Similarly, UX-15 highlighted how organizational routines and limited resources often hinder efforts to integrate accessibility practices, describing how advocacy for such practices requires persistence and strategic negotiation. UX-7 shared a compelling story about implementing large-scale forestry and public administration systems without

measuring productivity outcomes. This lack of accountability frustrated him as it devalued UX's contribution to meaningful change. UX-14 echoed this sentiment, discussing the maturity gap in organizations that treat UX as an afterthought rather than a strategic asset. He highlighted the need for continuous advocacy to educate stakeholders about UX's value.

These accounts illustrate the tension between UX values and organizational priorities. UX influencers often rely on regulatory standards, such as accessibility laws, to legitimize their initiatives, otherwise viewed as secondary to the company's immediate goals. This theme emphasizes the resilience required to champion UX and human-centered practices within structures that may not fully recognize their value. Advocacy is a persistent challenge for UX influencers, significantly when systemic resistance undermines efforts to prioritize user needs. The interviews underline the importance of building organizational maturity to ensure that UX is considered integral to innovation and productivity.

3. Ethical considerations in the use of emerging technologies

Participants frequently mentioned the ethical implications of using artificial intelligence (AI) in UX design. Although many UX influencers see AI as a tool for enhancing user experiences, they also expressed concerns about transparency, privacy, and potential misuse. UX-3 spoke about her cautious approach to AI, noting that while AI can streamline workflows and improve interface accessibility, it must be implemented with strict ethical oversight to prevent bias and protect user data. UX-9's reflections on AI in Figma products underscored the need for transparency, especially in areas that handle sensitive data. When discussing AI, UX-13 remarked, "AI is a powerful tool, but its use must be balanced with an understanding of its limitations and the ethical implications it carries," highlighting the critical need for ethical vigilance in technology-driven design processes.

The UX influencers voiced a shared commitment to maintaining ethical standards when integrating AI, balancing innovation with responsibility. This theme highlights the influencers' dual role as innovators and guardians of ethical design principles, ensuring that technological advancements serve users fairly and transparently.

4. Integrating accessibility as an essential UX practice

Accessibility emerged as a crucial aspect of human-centered design, with participants advocating for it as a core UX principle rather than an add-on. Many discussed the need for universal design standards that ensure accessibility for all users. For example, UX-12 emphasized that accessibility should be embedded in the design process from the outset, aligning with ethical considerations and legal requirements. UX-5 noted that organizational buy-in for accessibility can be challenging but highlighted internal education's importance in building team awareness and commitment.

UX-7 and UX-14 offered nuanced perspectives on AI's role in UX. UX-7 cautioned against systems prioritizing efficiency over user experience, citing examples where poorly designed interfaces caused user frustration. UX-14 envisioned AI as a supportive tool rather than a replacement, describing its potential to generate design ideas and analyze user insights while emphasizing the need for human oversight.

Several participants also shared experiences of using external partnerships to evaluate and improve the accessibility of their products. UX-4, for instance, recounted her collaboration with disability organizations to conduct usability testing, which allowed her team to identify and address accessibility gaps. This theme underscores the participants' dedication to creating products that are accessible to all, illustrating the alignment of UX practices with broader social values. Ethical considerations are paramount as AI becomes integrated into UX workflows. While AI can enhance creativity and efficiency, these influencers stressed the importance of balancing innovation and ethical responsibility to protect user trust.

5. Accessibility and inclusivity as cornerstones

UX-11 highlighted significant gaps in accessibility training, noting that many designers lacked awareness or expertise. She observed that organizations often deprioritize accessibility despite its apparent benefits for user engagement, as seen in her work with audiobook platforms. UX-14 added that legal mandates, such as EU accessibility directives, are essential drivers for organizations to adopt inclusive practices. However, he warned that reactive approaches—like last-minute compliance—often lead to suboptimal results. UX-2 stressed that "Accessibility should be a part of good UX practice, not an afterthought," highlighting the need for systemic changes in education and professional practice to prioritize inclusivity. UX-16 underscores the value of proactive inclusivity, noting that addressing accessibility early fosters better user engagement and reduces last-minute compliance struggles.

While accessibility is increasingly recognized as essential, its implementation is hindered by a lack of training and proactive strategies. These stories emphasize the need for systemic changes in education and organizational practices to embed accessibility into UX design.

6. The evolution of UX influencers

UX-14 highlighted the shifting role of UX professionals, noting that while the field has grown in recognition, there's a risk of complacency. UX-14 pointed out that newer designers often skip foundational research, opting for quick solutions instead of addressing root problems. UX-11 shared her journey from journalism to UX, emphasizing designers' responsibility in shaping interfaces and societal impacts. UX-2 observed that UX titles often carry strategic weight, remarking, "Titles like 'UX Lead' legitimize the position and give credibility to the discipline in organizational hierarchies." This reflects the evolving role of UX influencers as not only practitioners but also advocates for institutional change. This reflects the evolving role of UX influencers as not only practitioners but also advocates for institutional change. UX-6 reflects on the growing influence of UX professionals, who drive systemic change by advocating for human-centered practices while navigating organizational and technological complexities.

The role of UX influencers is evolving from advocating for UX's relevance to ensuring that its principles are not diluted as the field matures. This transition highlights the importance of mentorship and community-building to sustain the integrity of the human-centered design.

The thematic analysis reveals the complex, multifaceted role of UX influencers in advocating for human-centered design (Braun & Clarke, 2022; 2006). Empathy is a guiding principle, motivating these professionals to prioritize inclusivity and accessibility in their work. The analysis also highlights their challenges in organizational settings, where advocacy for UX practices often requires strategic negotiation and resilience. Ethical considerations, especially around AI, show the influencers' commitment to responsible design, while their focus on accessibility reflects an ongoing effort to create universally inclusive experiences. Together, these themes demonstrate the impactful work of UX influencers in advancing human-centered design and setting ethical standards for the industry. UX influencers also highlight the historical roots of UX advocacy, the evolving challenges of organizational adoption, and the moral dimensions of integrating emerging technologies like AI. These narratives reinforce the role of UX influencers as champions of empathy, accessibility, and ethical innovation, paving the way for a more inclusive and impactful design future.

Discussion

The findings highlight the critical role of UX influencers in advancing HCD principles, demonstrating their ability to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications. Rooted in HCD, the discussion underscores the emphasis on empathy, inclusivity, and ethical design as essential

components of modern UX practices. These values resonate with the need for holistic, user-focused solutions in an increasingly digital and interconnected world (Rogers et al., 2023; Canziba, 2018).

Empathy emerged as a recurring theme, reflecting its role in understanding user needs and fostering meaningful connections. The findings reinforce arguments from the Introduction that empathy-centric methodologies enhance stakeholder engagement and improve design outcomes (Rogers et al., 2023; Drouet et al., 2023). By embedding empathy into the iterative HCD process, UX practitioners ensure solutions resonate with users' contexts and challenges, aligning with the ISO 9241-220:2019 standards.

UX influencers face significant organizational barriers, including siloed structures and limited prioritization of accessibility and inclusivity. As highlighted in the Introduction, navigating these challenges requires interdisciplinary collaboration and strategic advocacy (Avadhana, 2024; Shukla et al., 2024). These findings align with the theoretical foundation of HCD, which stresses the importance of integrating user needs into every stage of the design and development process.

The rise of AI and other advanced technologies introduces both opportunities and risks. The findings emphasize the ethical responsibility of UX practitioners to ensure transparency, fairness, and user control in AI-driven systems, reflecting concerns raised in the Introduction and HCD frameworks (Muralikumar & McDonald, 2024; Canziba, 2018). HCD principles provide a roadmap for addressing these challenges by aligning technological innovation with human values.

Accessibility remains a critical but underutilized aspect of UX practice. By embedding accessibility into the design process, practitioners not only comply with global standards like the Directive (2019) but also enhance usability for diverse user groups (Petrie et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2023; Mohamed et al., 2024). The findings reaffirm the Introduction's argument that prioritizing accessibility fosters equity and reduces barriers to digital interaction.

As the field of UX evolves, practitioners are increasingly seen as advocates and educators who drive systemic change. The Introduction highlights this dual responsibility, and the findings show that UX influencers must navigate organizational complexities while promoting HCD principles (Avadhana, 2024; Hordvik et al., 2023). Their role in aligning design practices with user needs and ethical considerations solidifies their impact within technological ecosystems.

Prior studies have examined UX from a technical perspective, emphasizing tools and methodologies (Canziba, 2018; Lazar et al., 2017). However, our study contributes to this discussion by centering on the social influence of UX professionals and their role as advocates for accessibility. While previous literature has acknowledged empathy as a core UX principle (Drouet et al., 2023), our findings illustrate how UX influencers operationalize empathy in professional settings, navigating organizational resistance and ethical concerns around AI. This research, therefore, expands the understanding of UX influencers as key figures in shaping design ethics and accessibility policies.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This study underscores the importance of leveraging HCD frameworks to address contemporary challenges in UX design. Future research should explore strategies for embedding empathy, accessibility, and ethical considerations into organizational and educational practices. Further investigation into the intersection of HCD and emerging technologies, such as AI, will provide valuable insights into designing inclusive, user-centered systems.

Contribution and Conclusion

By examining the strategies and challenges of UX influencers through a netnographic lens, this study advances discussions in HCD and accessibility. Future research could further investigate the

institutional barriers UX professionals face and explore how their advocacy translates into policy changes within tech companies. This study contributes to UX literature by providing a unique perspective on the social and ethical dimensions of UX through the lens of influencers. It highlights the importance of empathy and advocacy in UX, positioning these values as essential components of human-centered design. Additionally, the research underscores the influence of online communities and networks in shaping UX practices, illustrating the power of collective engagement in promoting accessibility, inclusivity, and ethical innovation.

In conclusion, this netnographic study highlights UX influencers' critical role in advancing human-centered design. Through empathy, advocacy, and accessibility, they shape UX beyond usability, emphasizing ethics and inclusivity. Their evolving role underscores design's impact on industry standards and social change. As technology advances, their insights guide the UX community in prioritizing human needs and values at every stage.

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Session 4: Artscapes

Netnographic Transmutation: Transforming Digital Data into Art

Stephen O'Sullivan

Univeristy College Cork, Cork, Ireland

Abstract

Since its inception netnography has been employed to explore a broad range of contexts. Diversity of application and flexibility in approach is one of netnography's greatest strengths (Kozinets 2015). Its on-going application across the social sciences investigates everything from the playful aspects of consumption, food and fun (Kozinets et al. 2017) to the serious life and death contexts, such as understanding consumer-established safety structures in unregulated and illegal drug markets (O'Sullivan, 2015). Because netnography preserves the natural voice of the consumer while maintaining privacy boundaries, it is an avant-garde, ethically driven, methodology suitable for exploring sensitive research contexts. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing evolution of netnography via an exploration of how sensitive digital data can be transformed into engaging scientifically grounded art-based visual narratives.

Drawing from conversations about the translation of data into alternative forms of representation, the paper explores the concept transmutation, and how it can be applied to netnographic data. Transmutation goes beyond the normal understanding of translation (Jakobson, 1959): it's a form of intersemiotic translation, attempting to translate a "cultural ontology" by placing an emphasis on feeling meanings through "synesthetic fusion" (Severi, 2014). Because these meanings can be shaped by the heterogenous structures and sensory capabilities of the representation medium, far from a narrowing tool, transmutation can be understood as an exercise in expansion.

This paper explores what happens when the same sensitive cultural context and data set is transmuted into different art forms. The steps that underlie the process of transmutation, such as translation via iconography, metaphor, analogy, selectivity, redundancy, and emotional intensity, are discussed while reflecting on two cases of netnographic transmutation derived from the Covid-19 context. *10 Business Days* is a research comic representing the intensity of the existential threat during the rapid revert to an alternative mode of existence during the pandemic, whereas *Encounters of Nothingness*, captures the loss of self and emptiness felt during the prolonged experience of experiencing the pandemic. These representations can be considered variants of that same analytical imagination, both narratives are drawn from the same data set but differ in their purport, tone, and atmosphere. As Severi (2014) states: 'intersemiotic transmutation generates forms of thought in audiences where what must be conveyed joins, at a different level, with what may be expressed'. The argument is that by expanding the toolkit of how netnographic data is represented, new audiences possessing with alternative lenses, axioms and approaches can be engaged by diverse research contexts, leading to increased interdisciplinary and public collaboration.

The presentation will feature a 10-minute film and key frames from the illustrated comic to showcase the steps employed in the netnographic transmutation of Covid-19. The aim of the presentation is to generate new areas of discussion on the creation of scientifically grounded art forms that capture the complexity of human emotion and provide an opportunity for the meanings of digital data to be felt by audiences through multiple sensory and narrative pathways.

Immersive Art and Indigenous Meanings: Combining Museum Ethnography with a Netnography of the Meow Wolf Fan Wiki

Robert Kozinets

University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

Abstract

Since its founding in 2016, the Meow Wolf art collective has transformed the landscape of immersive art with its first installation, *The House of Eternal Return* in Santa Fe. The once-underground American collective has been remarkably successful, now drawing in nearly 10 million visitors across four venues and several pop-ups, with two more permanent installations in the works. Its large spatial immersive narrative experiences take over buildings and draw visitors into a connective form of exploration of their complex imagery and layered meanings. They also inspire forms of engagement that transcend the deeply explorative deciphering of the immediate physical experience and call out for the addition of collective digital sensemaking reminiscent of the type Jenkins (2008) compared to Levy's (1997) "collective intelligence." These experiences blur the boundaries between art, entertainment, and consumer culture, providing a rich environment for netnographic study—especially as fans increasingly engage in discussions and decipher these narratives through user-generated platforms.

One of the most striking developments in the wake of Meow Wolf's success is the rise of fan-based Wikis dedicated to cataloging and interpreting its vast narrative universe. These Wikis, often curated by dedicated enthusiasts, serve as living documents where immersive art experiences are deconstructed, theorized, and reinterpreted by the community. Combined with online data from Reddit and other platforms, a netnography of these Wikis offers insights into how audiences engage with and co-create the meanings in Meow Wolf, transforming what might otherwise be a fleeting encounter with the art into an ongoing dialogue. Fan-created content reveals a depth of interpretive labor informs our understanding of the contemporary consumption of art and authorship.

Combining an ethnography of the physical museum space with netnography provides a vantage point through which to study the interactions taking place within these fan communities. This netnography of Meow Wolf's fan Wikis offer a window into how visitors make sense of their immersive experiences after they leave the physical installation. These Wikis provide not only factual information about the exhibits but also serve as spaces for fans to collaborate on theorizing the deeper themes of the art. An important element considered by this netnography is the discussions that center around indigenous motifs present in Meow Wolf's design. This paper will focus on these discussions, which raise important moral and social questions about how non-indigenous artists and audiences consume and repurpose indigenous cultural symbols. As fans of the art document their experiences and create narrative connections that may not have been explicitly stated by the artists, they effectively expand the boundaries of the immersive art system. The fan Wiki platform, while seemingly disconnected from the formal art world, acts as an extension of the immersive experience, shaping how future visitors engage with the art. In this way, the fan Wiki becomes an integral part of what Howard Becker called the "art world," an art ecosystem every bit as essential to the meaning-making process as the physical installations themselves.

“The Creation of the World is an Ordinary Day”: Physical and Virtual Cultural Encounters through Mail Art

Elena Zottola[1], Paola Gioia[2,3], Carlo Gioia[1,4]

[1]Radura (Indipendent Research Collective), Latronico, Italy. [2]Radura (Indipendent Research Collective) and University of Naples "Parthenope", Latronico, Italy. [3]University of Naples "Parthenope", Naples, Italy. [4]Universität für künstlerische und industrielle Gestaltung Linz, Linz, Austria

Abstract

Recognizing the unprecedented relevance of cultural dimensions in today's globalized world (Appadurai, 1996), this research examines the intersection of digital and material cross-cultural communication (Adams, 2005) using virtual postcards as a cultural exchange. The study begins with a netnographic investigation of Postcrossing.com, an online platform facilitating the global exchange of physical postcards transcending geographic and cultural boundaries. During the study, one of the researchers became a member of the Postcrossing platform and explored the emotions and challenges of virtual postcard exchange. These insights proved crucial in connecting with the online community and developing a position of participant observation (Kozinets et al., 2018). The researcher joined the Facebook group "Postcrossing Italia," interviewed the group administrator, and submitted an open-ended survey to the community. Key emerged themes were the nostalgic value of handwritten messages on postcards, the sensory experience, the message depth, the dynamic of reciprocity, and the nostalgia for a disused mode of communication in the ever-accelerating contemporary interactions. Based on these findings and thanks to the combination of artistic, ethnographic, and technological contributions by the authors of this work, the research progressed to an experimental artistic phase that embraced the use of artistic materials (McNiff, 2008; Leavy, 2020). The research intersected with a mail art and relational art project developed in 2018 at the Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA) in Tallinn, titled “The Creation of the World is an Ordinary Day”. Initially, postcards were created through staged photography to visually interpret Baltic mythology (Zeipes, 2017). Subsequently, these postcards were digitized and shared on an online platform to allow users worldwide to compile them and communicate stories, memories, and requests to imaginary recipients. Finally, a 3D-rendered virtual mailbox, framed in wood to simulate its physical structure, captured these virtual messages in real-time, collecting postcards through the online platform. This mailbox served as a symbolic bridge between the digital and material worlds, highlighting the project's focus on the convergence of these two forms of communication.

In 2021, the installation became part of the international art exhibition contexts of “Fotografia Europea” and “Cortona On the Move” held in two Italian regions. In 2022, the collected messages were reinterpreted and showcased at the Italian Institute of Culture (IIC) of Barcelona through an interactive installation that encouraged viewers to relate to the setting and its embodied messages (Bourriaud, 1998). The messages that are collected, from poetic reflections to folklore, pop culture quotes to life stories or personal greetings worldwide, have become vehicles for cultural hybridization through artistic practice. The installations revealed how participatory art can merge physical and digital spaces, fostering an ever-evolving intercultural dialogue (Miller et al., 2017; Canali, 2019; Hutson, 2024). With its transformative power, this work contributes to netnography by combining community-based research with experimental art practices. The project reimagines the globalized world as a hybrid and dynamic space of physical-virtual encounters mediated by art and technology, inspiring a new way of thinking about cultural exchange (Lewis, 1999).

Keywords: netnography, participatory art, digital-physical communication, cross-cultural communication, postcards.

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Synesthetic Soundscapes: How User-generated Embodied Metaphors Transform Music into Multisensory Art

Rebecca Pera, Roberto Fassone

University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Abstract

The digital transformation of the music industry has revolutionized how listeners engage with music, shifting from passive consumption to active participation. Among digital platforms, YouTube has emerged as a participatory space where audiences engage with and reinterpret music through creative expressions. By examining metaphorical transformations in YouTube user-generated comments, this netnographic research investigates how consumers transform and reshape original auditory stimuli, co-creating new multisensory experiences.

Metaphors are powerful cognitive tools that enable individuals to convey complex emotions and sensory experiences through symbolic language. According to foundational literature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), metaphors provide a rich framework for expressing deep emotional and sensory associations, transforming abstract concepts into tangible imaginaries.

Embodied cognition (e.g. Llewellyn, 2021) offers a theoretical lens to understand metaphors, emphasizing that sensory experiences (e.g. Krishna et al., 2017) ground abstract thought. Our work builds on the sensory perception framework from marketing and consumer research (Elder & Krishna, 2012) to investigate the relationship between user-generated YouTube content that carries metaphoric meaning and consumers' creative transformation that reshapes original stimuli.

Method and results

This netnographic study on user-generated content examines 100 still video clips on YouTube, showcasing independent music from Tuareg guitar rock to egg punk rock, selected based on views, likes, and the depth of community interactions surrounding the shared content. It highlights how users' embodied metaphors recontextualize, enrich, and reshape the auditory experience by creating new layers of meaning and connection. Such creative transformation occurs through an enrichment process that can be synthesized in three main categories: First a multisensory experience: metaphors like *"a rollercoaster of silk on fire"* or *"like falling asleep on a sun-drenched train"* evoke visual, tactile, or even olfactory sensations. These expressions invite listeners to engage with music through multiple senses, enriching their overall experience. Second, metaphors help articulate complex emotions, fostering a deeper connection with the music. For example, the analogy "*This is like driving alone at night after a fight you regret*" captures a melancholic, deeply relatable feeling, allowing listeners to project personal emotions onto the music. Finally, metaphors facilitate an iterative feedback loop in which listeners collectively reinterpret and co-create meaning. By sharing imaginative descriptions, users become active participants in the cultural production of music, enhancing its significance. For instance, when a comment like "*sounds like the world is ending in the most beautiful way*" inspires another listener to associate the song with themes of apocalypse and beauty, it demonstrates how metaphors shape shared interpretations. This study extends the idea that metaphors can alter creative output (Marin et al., 2014) by emphasizing their power to generate novel imaginaries, rooted in a dynamic collective loop process.

Embodied user-generated metaphors become a canvas for a novel experience that reframes music as an interactive and evolving artifact, giving it new meanings beyond the creator's intent. Through embodied metaphors, the auditory stimulus becomes a collaborative, imaginative space, either enhancing or subverting the original work, shaped by collective creativity.

Session 5: Intersectional Netnography for empowerment

Female body power over patriarchy: A Netnographic study on the Turkish Women's Volleyball League players' Instagram images

Burcu Asena-Salman

TED University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract

During the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, women in sports were propelled to the forefront as the pioneers initiated the country's modernization process. Because of the turbulent political and economic situation, sports stagnated. A century later, in 2023, with the Turkish National Women's Volleyball Team winning championships in various international tournaments, female athletes finally came into the spotlight. Sports is a field traditionally dominated by men, where physical power has historically been a means of asserting dominance. However, with their victories, female volleyball players became prominent figures in their own right, each amassing over a million followers on social media, particularly Instagram. As a result, many of these athletes increased their presence on Instagram, leveraging their success to become natural influencers in their professional field. This study aims to analyze and compare the Instagram photos of national athletes in the Turkish Women's Volleyball League—officially branded as the League of the Sultans"—using Erving Goffman's (1979) theory on gendered representations of the female and male body. Goffman theorized that advertising constructs strict classifications of male and female appearances, reinforcing idealized gender norms. Although his study was based on a small sample of magazine advertisements from the 1970s, its relevance in contemporary digital spaces remains an open research question. The study employs Netnography to collect and analyze Instagram data, including photographs, follower counts, posting frequency, thematic content, and engagement rates. Sampling from the League of the Sultans provides insight into the demographic representation of Turkish professional sportswomen. In the first phase, players' official Instagram accounts were identified, and their photos were collected, excluding images related to sports performances (matches and training) and sponsor-related content. Due to computational limitations, most images required cropping. In the second phase, approximately 16,200 cropped images were analyzed using Machine Learning (ML) techniques, clustering them based on gaze, facial expressions, and body poses. Finally, these clusters were compared against Goffman's theoretical framework to assess how closely they align with his gendered classifications. The findings offer significant insights into how "modern" Turkish women publicly present their bodies. This study contributes to the literature by providing an updated understanding of female body language through big data analysis. Additionally, the collection of Instagram images serves as a visual autobiographical archive, enriching feminist historiography within a traditionally patriarchal domain. The study highlights that while AI enables large-scale data analysis, human intervention remains essential in data collection, preparation, and interpretation.

Keywords: Machine Learning, netnography, female athletes, body language, semiotics

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Tackling online gender violence: an action case netnography of football clubs and their fans

Alex Fenton[1], Maz Hardey[2], Wasim Ahmed[3], Rosy Boardman[4], Emma Kavanagh[5]

[1]University of Chester, Chester, United Kingdom. [2]Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom. [3]University of Hull, Hull, United Kingdom. [4]University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom. [5]Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, United Kingdom

Abstract

Women's football continues to grow globally and in parallel with a worldwide audience of billions of social media users. Online gender-based violence is a significant problem for football clubs and their online presence (Fenton et al., 2023). Our research builds on this earlier work to explore potential solutions to this problem using netnography and an action-case research approach.

Football clubs are often small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and they have a financial and ethical imperative to be inclusive and to support and protect players and fans from abuse. Our goal is to provide a greater understanding of fan behaviour online and how gender-based online violence, privacy, and security issues exist. The present study answer these societal challenges of the affected women as well as calls from authors, including Fenton et al. (2023,) for further netnographic research and practical solutions. To bring us closer to a future without risks of gender-based violence, we pose the following questions:

- RQ1 Who are the influential social media voices relating to women's football?
- RQ2 How do fans react to women's football on social media in the framing of gender-based violence?

We explore these questions by continuing to immerse ourselves in women's football groups on social media to our team immersion journal. We combine netnography with an action-case approach (Hardey et al., 2023). Action case research involves working with academics and practitioners to create understanding and practical solutions. It strikes a balance between change and understanding using a creative bricolage of methods. This includes qualitative and quantitative methods, including netnography and social network analysis.

Our findings build on previously identified themes from social media responses to women's football and action brand recommendations pertaining to gender-based violence. We worked with football clubs, marketing teams and players to explore their use of social media in the UK and Brazil. The study helped us understand more about social media fan communities' culture and influencers (RQ1) and how fans react to women's football on social media with comments on gender-based violence (RQ2). Posts and comments from online misogynists such as Joey Barton were analysed as part of the study.

The article expands on previous studies of how football clubs as SMEs utilise social media to represent, promote, and advertise themselves and their sport and the escalation of gender-based violence on social media against women players. Furthermore, we compare and contrast sports clubs in the global North (UK) and global South (Brazil) to extend the understanding of this important topic.

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Entrepreneurial Social Media Identities: An Intersectional Exploration

Georgia Fenlon

Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

This research explores how women entrepreneurs develop their social media identities through an intersectional lens — specifically at the nexus of their age, class and gender — to explore how power is produced and maintained in entrepreneurship (Dy & MacNeil, 2023). Neoliberal discourse has perpetuated the notion that digital technologies present a level playing field for entrepreneurs — offering meritocracy and flexibility in a domain void of marginalisation (Castells, 2010). However, research has established entrepreneurship as an inherently masculine domain that places women in a deficit (Ahl & Marlow; 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2015) and reproduces offline inequalities (Dy *et al.,* 2017), leading to inequitable pathways to self-enterprise for women, who must remain visible (Duffy & Hund, 2017) and develop unique identity performances that both support their brand and adhere to postfeminist principles (Heizmann & Liu, 2020). Additionally, women must navigate platform power dynamics which govern their market access on social media (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021) and, thus, how they present themselves to reach prospective customers (Ashman *et al.,* 2017). Indeed, this presents a paradox whereby the supposedly democratising nature of social media places women in a 'digital double-bind' — compelling them to curate idealised, highly visible personas that require extensive invisible labour to maintain (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Yet, how women's age and socioeconomic status intersect with their gender to affect these self-branding strategies has been overlooked in the extant literature (Gill, 2016). Thus, this research will utilise intersectionality as a threshold concept (Dy & MacNeil, 2023) to explore how identity categories interlock and influence women's entrepreneurial self-presentations on social media according to hegemonic power structures. Netnographic data collection and semi-structured interviews will be conducted at multiple phases using immersion, investigation and interaction (Kozinets, 2020) over nine months to facilitate a longitudinal time horizon and monitor how participants' identity performances develop in real time. While a handful of studies have utilised netnographic methods to understand entrepreneurial social media identities (Heizmann & Liu, 2020), their cross-sectional nature disregards how these identities are developed in real time. This presents an important issue to be examined due to the dynamic social media domain in which entrepreneurs are considered synonymous with their brand (Thompson-Whiteside *et al.,* 2017). Conducting netnographic analysis will facilitate a rich understanding of how such self-presentations are curated in accordance with online power systems.

It is difficult to estimate the results of this research given its theoretical and methodological novelty and the early stage it is currently at. However, based on the extant literature, it can be gauged that privileged women's performances will converge with their dominant social positions to curate "appropriately feminised" personas (Heizmann & Liu, 2020) that reinforce prevailing neoliberal ideals. Thus, it can also be surmised that women operating from disadvantageous positions, such as those outside of the digital native demographic and those of a lower socioeconomic status, may also attempt to reproduce the same narratives through their social media content by strategically harnessing their adverse circumstances to propagate popularised narratives of empowerment, individualism and self-transformation.

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Misogyny and Resistance: Digital Gender Performativity in Women’s Football at the 2024 Olympics

Felipe Holanda, Grayci Kelli Patrocínio, André Luiz de Souza-Leão

Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil

Abstract

Women's football has become a site of intense symbolic and cultural dispute. In Brazil, this practice has historically faced structural exclusion, limiting its visibility and legitimacy. This marginalization extends to digital spaces, where social media serves as a battleground for reinforcing or contesting gender norms in sports. During the women's football matches at the 2024 Olympics, the Brazilian audience engaged in debates marked by polarized discourses, revealing both practices of exclusion, expressed as hate speech, and practices of resistance, articulated as counter speech. This study investigates how were misogynistic discourses performed and contested by the Brazilian audience during the women's football matches at the 2024 Olympics on social media. Judith Butler’s Theory of Performativity was adopted. This approach understands discursive acts as practices that not only reflect reality but also actively construct it. Social norms and identities, such as gender, are neither intrinsic nor natural but are constructed and reinforced through repetitive acts. Within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), performativity explains how gendered consumption emerges from digital interactions and resistance to hegemonic norms. Social media amplifies discursive struggles, shaping norms while enabling counter-discursive resistance, positioning consumer identity as performative and continuously renegotiated. Using a netnographic approach through investigative data strategy, 364 comments published on YouTube and Twitter – dominant platforms for debates and textual interactions about sports in Brazil – during the six matches played by the Brazilian national team were analyzed. Of these, 159 were classified as hate speech and 205 as counter speech. The results revealed emerging codes categorized as performativities. Hate speech was structured into five categories: disinformation, which disseminates false or distorted narratives questioning the legitimacy of women's football; discrimination, reaffirming

gender hierarchies that delegitimize women's presence in sports; dehumanization, reducing athletes to objects or stereotypes, denying their subjectivity; hostility, symbolic aggression aimed at devaluing female players; and intimidation, through implicit or explicit threats intended to silence female participation. These practices were collectively conceptualized under the dimension of Regulation of Gender Norms, which highlights how hate speech reinforces patriarchal values, perpetuates gender inequalities, and constructs symbolic barriers to the inclusion of women in sports. In contrast, counter speech was categorized into another five performative practices: argumentation, using data and reason to deconstruct exclusionary narratives; denunciation, publicly exposing hate practices to foster awareness and accountability; mobilization, organizing collective actions to promote women's football and resist hate speech; re-signification, transforming oppressive narratives into empowering messages; and solidarity, building discursive alliances to amplify support for women in sports. These practices were collectively framed as Resistance and Subversion of Gender Norms, capturing how counter speech destabilizes oppressive behaviors and creates new possibilities for inclusion, offering expanded spaces and meanings for women's participation in football. This study contributes to CCT by positioning social media as critical sites of cultural transformation, where consumers actively participate in the reconfiguration of gender norms. It highlights how these digital arenas simultaneously perpetuate and resist exclusionary practices, advancing the legitimacy of women's football and fostering its integration into the sports market as a space of empowerment and equality.

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Session 6: Netnographies of identity and community

From Heres vs. Come Heres: A Netnographic Analysis of Identity on the Eastern Shore of Virginia

Dana-Nicoleta Lascu

University of Richmond, Richmond, USA

Abstract

This study explores the collective identity of individuals on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in social media and blogs. Using netnography, a qualitative research method appropriate for exploring social media interactions (Kozinets, 2020), this study investigates how life-long residents, known as *from heres*, express their identities online, converging around shared norms, values, and cultural practices that differentiate them from newcomers to the region – *come heres*. While distinctions between newcomers and lifelong residents are common, this contrast profoundly shapes discourse on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Settled in the early 1600s and evolving in relative isolation for over 300 years, Virginia's Eastern Shore (the Shore), a narrow peninsula between the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic, was accessible only by a lengthy rail, car, or boat trip to the north or by a long ferry ride to the mainland until the 1960s,

when the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel was built; prohibitively expensive tolls continue to limit access.

After analyzing the data, three distinct groups emerged. The first, Nostalgic *From Heres*, celebrates a shared history through photographs, poems, and narratives, many of thriving communities long gone, such as the once prospering Hogg and Cobb Islands devastated by the 1933 hurricane. Among shared stories are nostalgic postings of Shore businesses, advertising, holiday celebrations, and poems of individuals whose names still resonate in the region today. See Figure.

A second group, Combative *From Heres*, deplores *come heres'* wealth and values, along with their desire to change Shore communities. They argue that *come heres* view locals as "nice enough but don't expect to have a meaningful discussion… with them… Sure there's some up-class stuff to do in Norfolk, but that's an hour drive away… It's at this point that the *come heres* decide it's their responsibility to change things… And too often the changes are aided and abetted by local officials who are afraid the *come heres* will accuse them of being provincial and insular" (Jackson, 2020).

A third group, We Are All *Come Heres*, represents both *from* and *come heres*, with the latter accounting for most posts. This group shares information about local events and service providers and contributes to blogs extolling the beauty and warmth of the Shore. Posts argue that "unless we are of the Powhatan tribe, we are all *come heres*. Captain John Smith… found…. fertile land, a vibrant fishery, an inviting climate, pristine waters, clean air, and a relatively friendly reception from the… friendly Powhatan." (Strock, 2018). This group appreciates the local language "filled with color and sound [and the locals] steeped in a lifetime of conversation that draws from the storm and bounty of the land and water, that is tuned to the rhythms of harvest and migration" (Horosko, 2013).

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Tweet it like you mean it: Community Notes and the Construction of Accountability of X

Jack Campbell

Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Social media companies have been criticised for their failure to counter the misleading information created and shared on their platforms. Amongst other issues, critics have identified a lack of accountability: social media companies have relative impunity for what users post on their sites. The conventional corporate response to this accountability deficit has typically been to strengthen in-house content moderation. Recently, however, a new approach has emerged, pioneered the microblogging site, X (formerly Twitter): user-led fact-checking. 'Community Notes' attempts to take claims of

misinformation from the comments of a social media post to a separate, audit-oriented function where user-volunteer ‘contributors’ can write and rank ‘notes’, adding context to potentially misleading posts.

Community Notes offers a challenge to traditional conceptualisations of accountability, widely accepted as the right of one party to receive information from another party who has a duty to supply it. Unlike conventional accountability, the emphasis of accountability evidenced by Community Notes is not process quality but consensus across the political divide. On Community Notes, accountability is not discharged by experts, but lay users and truth is understood not by set criteria informed by strict rules, professional training and a code of ethics, but by users’ ‘diversity of perspectives’. That is, while traditional accountability is centralised, residing in public institutions (law, state, parliament), the emphasis on X shifts towards a ‘distributed accountability’, discharged across the body politic. Accountability research in accounting, has theorised the online user as a ‘lay auditor’, with accountability embodied in the ‘wisdom of crowds’, but this conceptualisation has not been extended to users’ role on social media sites, nor the effect this decentralisation has on accountability outcomes.

A netnography of the Community Notes site was undertaken, seeking to understand the effects of a lay user-oriented accountability process on accountability outcomes. The primary author became a Community Notes contributor, writing and rating notes to understand processes (assemblages, uses, features and users) on the site. This active netnography was complemented by a thematic analysis of documents published by X, including X posts, blog posts, white papers, policy documents and corporate reports. Documents were selected for analysis through a theoretical sampling approach, as well as a keyword search of terms related to Community Notes, misinformation and accountability. The results of our empirical analysis are interpreted using Mouffe’s theory of (ant)agonistics, which focuses on the intractability of political issues and the limits of consensus.

While a positive step towards quicker fact-checking, the democratisation of accountability and respect of diverse perspectives, we find that Community Notes is nonetheless fundamentally flawed as an accountability process. Political posts, often in most need of moderation, end up stuck in an accountability process centred on agreement through consensus. The nature of truth is contested in our increasingly post-political society and, in focusing on consensus on the political, Community Notes is doomed to fail in its discharge of accountability from the outset.

Rediscovering Connection: Investigating Brain Synchronicity Among Consumers in Artistic Performances

Giada Mattias, Giacomo Bagna, Rebecca Pera

University of Torino, Torino, Italy

Abstract

This research explores the mechanisms of brain synchronicity among multiple consumers during an artistic performance, highlighting how this phenomenon can offer insights into human interconnectedness. Drawing on social cognitive neuroscience, the study adopts ethnography, netnography and neuroscientific methods, aiming to understand the cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of synchronicity and its potential to foster prosocial behaviour. Emphasising the role of self-organisation in natural systems, by the means of neuroscience techniques, the study suggests that interpersonal coordination during artistic performances is incisive in creating a deep interconnection and bond between individuals but also a personal catharsis of self-discovery and emotional release.

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Session 7: Expanding the Netnographic repertoire: tools and practices

Drawing Insights: da Vinci-Inspired Visual Methods for Netnographers

Michael Mulvey

University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. LIFE Research Institute, Ottawa, Canada

Abstract

"I watched helplessness as my wife's bag vanished into the X-ray machine. She grew frantic, fearing she'd never see her medications again." Such testimonies from online forums highlight the profound challenges of air travel for passengers with dementia. Our netnographic study builds on cultural cartography methods (Mulvey et al., 2025), extending them by integrating da Vinci's observational techniques with AI visualization tools.

Our methodology synthesizes narrative analysis with AI-generated visualization, building on cultural cartography's emphasis on emotional mapping. We analyze social media narratives to identify key emotional experiences and environmental triggers. Selected passages capturing essential moments are translated into DALL·E prompts, instructing the AI to create visualizations in da Vinci's style. Drawing on Mansur and DeFelipe's (2024) analysis of da Vinci's techniques for rendering emotional subtleties, we employ sfumato to capture emotional transitions and chiaroscuro to emphasize contrasts, conveying the psychological experiences of air travelers with dementia.

Analysis of online narratives from travel companions, travelers with dementia, and airport staff revealed recurring patterns of anxiety escalation. As one forum participant describes: "When TSA asked Dad to remove his belt, he refused, growing agitated. The fluorescent lights, announcements, crowds... it all became too much. His anxiety spiraled, and by boarding time, he was completely overwhelmed." These accounts reflect how emotions are shaped and experienced in specific spaces, emphasizing the significance of environmental design in evoking deep emotional responses (Urry, 2007). These emotional dynamics reflect deeper anxieties about autonomy, dignity, and personal security.

When forum participants described disorienting airport signage, DALL·E created sfumato visualizations conveying spatial and cognitive uncertainty. These visualizations serve dual purposes: as analytical tools for researchers studying complex emotional experiences and as communication devices engaging stakeholders. Analysis reveals behavioral patterns recurring across airports worldwide, suggesting these challenges are inherent to the air travel environment rather than location-specific. We hypothesize that airport designers and policymakers viewing these AI-generated interpretations will develop more profound empathy for travelers living with dementia.

This study contributes to the growing field of visual netnography (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024) while addressing pressing real-world challenges in accessible design (Holz et al., 2024). Future research could extend this methodology to contexts where emotions resist traditional articulation.

Keywords: visual netnography, generative AI, emotional landscapes, accessibility, dementia

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Incorporating Mobile Ethnography into Netnography: Experiences and Reflections from Research on Online Reviews

Lena Cavusoglu[1], Ulrike Gretzel[2], Robert V. Kozinets[2]

[1]Pacific University, Portland, USA. [2]University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

Abstract

Our method paper illustrates and develops the use of mobile ethnography as an elicitation method in the interaction movements of netnography, using online reviews as the context. Due to its nature and the way review readers and writers use platform affordances, online reviews often reveal minimal information about their writers and none about their readers. This limitation challenges netnographers aiming to understand specific consumer groups. To address this limitation, we adopt mobile ethnography to identify and analyze the multidimensional facets of Gen Z consumers' review reading and writing behaviors. Mobile ethnography, a dynamic and versatile interaction tool (e.g., Büscher and Urry, 2009; Lydahl et al., 2021) to elicit data, leverages the increasingly central role mobile devices play in young consumers' lives and capitalizes mobile technology's real-time observational and participatory affordances. Therefore, our study not only offers empirical insights with qualitative depth but also a methodological contribution to the interaction movement of netnographies. In this paper, we specifically focus on the latter.

We employ a team netnography format, centered on our own immersion. As our immersion movement, we track our own review reading and writing behaviors on various online platforms such as Amazon, Booking, OpenTable, Google Reviews, reflect on it in our immersion journals, and share it with other members of the research team. For the interaction movements, we leverage Dscout, a mobile ethnography platform, to recruit 20 Gen Z participants to experience, feel, and grasp the "texture" of their life (Novoa, 2015, p.99). We focus on Gen Z consumers because of their heavily reliance on reviews. Research show that 76% Gen Z shoppers prefer websites with reviews, 90% avoid products without reviews, and 54% consult reviews while shopping in-store (The Power Reviews, 2023).

We monitor participants through daily missions while interacting with and contributing to online reviews for various products and services within a one-month period. Our presentation will highlight our experiences using this novel interaction movement tool as a part of a netnographic study. We will discuss the benefits and challenges of mobile ethnography methods that are clearly distinguishes from reflective and retrospective interview methods. For instance, during a mobile ethnography, participants report their experiences online at the time of the experience, on-site, and in the mental space of the experience itself, allowing researchers to capture videos and still images generated in the moment (Stickdorn and Zehrer, 2010). However, these methods have a distinct learning curve, which is why we

will overview not only our findings but provide guidance for others wishing to better understand how to effectively incorporate mobile ethnography into netnographic research projects.

To align with the theme of the conference and creatively present findings, we produced an AI-animated video that illustrates how netnographers can present video data collected through mobile ethnography while protecting participants anonymity. In the final version, we will incorporate real quotes from our participants. During our presentation, we will also discuss how AI-generated videos can balance creativity with ethical considerations.

The Guided Immersion: Building Netnographic Skills to Generate Deep Data

Lucina Odoi

HFU Business School, Villingen-Schwenningen, Germany

Abstract

Research Background

Immersion is one of the six procedural movements of netnography (Kozinets, 2020). Described as “the heart of the data collection phase” (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024, p. 33) immersion is instrumental for identifying “highly meaningful deep data” (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022, p. 6). A central tool within the immersion process is the immersion journal, which serves as “reflective, catalytic, and analytic guide” (Kozinets, 2020, p. 282). However, netnographers within the ANR community have reported uncertainties regarding the effective execution of immersion (e.g. Brooks et al., 2024) and the creation of immersion journals (e.g., Marchowska-Raza, 2023). Such challenges have been highlighted during the Webinar on Immersion Journals (ANR, 2024) and at Netnocon conferences (e.g., Marchowska-Raza, 2024), revealing a perceived procedural ambiguity among novice netnographers.

This led to the formulation of the following research questions:

How can barriers to immersion be addressed, and how can netnographic skills be effectively taught to novice netnographers?

To address these research questions, I conducted a study with undergraduate students: a guided netnographic immersion. While individual human immersion into a cultural context is characteristic of netnography, I assumed that offering structure and guidance on conducting immersion could facilitate first-time netnographers’ immersions.

Research Design

Twenty-seven students participated in the study, which began with a kick-off meeting introducing netnography and immersion. Participants then completed five 60-minute social media immersion sessions, documenting their findings in immersion journals with guidance, including a set of guiding questions for inspiration (see Table 1). This approach drew on established qualitative research techniques, such as semi-structured interviews (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013). After the immersion phase, participants were interviewed about their immersion experiences.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that guided immersion effectively introduces new netnographers to the method.

While initial sessions were challenging, participants developed their skills in documenting immersions over time, indicating the acquisition of netnographic skills through the guided immersion process.

Initial interviews indicated that the briefing and structured design of the guided immersion facilitates immersion. Many participants utilised the guiding questions, and some found the journal layout instrumental for effective documentation.

Conclusion

This study suggests that guided immersion can successfully recruit and develop new netnographers. Let's get creative – and continue sharing these skills to strengthen the community of netnographers!

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Three-Mirrored Process: Immersion Journal, Social Media Traces, Scroll-Back Method

Priyanka Borpujari

Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Because of the many layers of precarity because of my positionality—a researcher with an Indian passport, enrolled in a university in Ireland, marginal PhD stipends, and non-existent fieldwork grant—I have embraced the philosophy of "patchwork ethnography" (Gunel and Watanabe, 2023) for my research, whereby I am attempting to understand the experiences of older women in using smartphones and social media. This has meant attempting to ground my research in anthropology beyond the traditional practice of longitudinal fieldwork for ethnography. At the same time, because the research investigates the experience of using social media—and the Internet connectedness that reveals the relationship between individuals and technology (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001)—it has been imperative to adopt all the many steps of netnography (Kozinets, 2010). This paper is a narrative of the immersion

journal that is being developed while undertaking the study of digital traces of the research participants. In doing so, the immersion journal to record my reflection of the digital traces of my research participants has taken many forms: a regular handwritten journal, audio notes, pen-and-pencil sketches in notebooks, and photographs that act as time stamps to remember moments (to be detailed in the longer ethnography). At the same time, the adoption of the scroll-back method (Robard and Lincoln, 2019) has also taken many forms beyond just scrolling through the social media history of my research participants. This paper thus weaves the ways in which the digital traces that I see, intersect with my own reflections from the immersion journal, and the reflections of the research participant as they look back at their own social media posts. Through, with vignettes as a method (Demetriou, 2023) in writing ethnographies, this paper will look at the possible commonalities and points of differences between each of the three modes of reflections, that mirror each other.

Accompanying this abstract is, hence, a photograph taken during the process of “scroll back”, and the final paper (as well as presentation) will thus include sketches of photographs, towards maintaining the anonymity of the research participants.

Session 8: Identity and visibility

Visual self-presentation on dating websites: Highlighting personal branding strategies through a netnographic approach

Maud Derbaix, Anne Gombault

Kedge Business School, Bordeaux, France

Abstract

The Internet and social networking sites have become essential places for seeking love or sexual encounters. In 2023, the number of visits to dating sites (Tinder, Grindr, Meetic, etc.) in France increased by 9% compared with 2022 - increase largely due to men: of the 2.3 million visitors, 70% were men and 30% women (Médiamétrie, 2023). On these dating sites - probably more than on traditional social media - individuals carefully shape and control their online image and personality, allowing them to present idealised versions of themselves by highlighting desirable traits and achievements while concealing flaws (Midgley et al., 2021; Vilnay-Yavez and Tifferet, 2015). It should be noted, however, that within this digital dating ecosystem, people are both consumers and products, with online dating transforming the individual self into a commodity available for consumption by others (Illouz, 2019; Minina et al., 2022).

This research, grounded in theories of self-presentation, personal branding and service-dominant logic, aims to gain a better understanding of strategies men adopt on dating websites. More specifically, it examines visual self-presentation – using photographs as tools for attraction – and its implications in the specific context of a well-known extramarital dating site. Relying on a netnographic approach, a qualitative and immersive study was carried out in France on heterosexual men who use a famous dating site. Participants' longitudinal observation was made of photos and behaviour on the site and in-depth interviews were carried out with regular or occasional users of the site.

The findings reveal men's motivations for using photos on sexual dating sites, which include distinguishing themselves from others, seeking validation to boost self-esteem, and attracting potential partners. The study also analyzes the types of shots and body staging employed in photo construction, highlighting a learning process that evolves from "family" photos to more professional images. Four key visual self-presentation strategies emerge from the data: escape, home, body, and arty.

By focusing on how men use photography to present their bodies on dating sites, this study underscores the significant existential role of photos. It shows that men's strategies for visual self-presentation mainly serve to shape and reinforce their identity and brand image, with attracting women being secondary. More broadly, by examining the commodification of the self, this research reveals both theoretical and practical implications for identity construction and personal branding in digital interactions.

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Navigating the “invisibility game”: Crafting self-care legitimacy on digital platforms

Beatrice Medici[1], Rossella Chiara Gambetti[1], Stefania Borghini[2]

[1]Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy. [2]Università Bocconi, Milan, Italy

Abstract

Consumer research has long studied self-care (e.g., from Thompson and Hirschman, 1995, to Hochstein et al., 2024). Digital platforms have offered a treasure trove of novel opportunities for consumers to practice, negotiate, amplify and reinforce self-care in constructing their individual and social identities. Despite that, only in recent years studies have begun to investigate self-care in digital platforms, still primarily as a research context rather than a central research focus (e.g., Hochstein, 2024). In pioneering work, Belk (2013) explored the role of digital platforms in enhancing self-care through blogging and social media as a form of self-therapy. In the current age of technoculture, self-care is increasingly marketized (Chatzidakis et al., 2024) on digital platforms, making it crucial to investigate how self-care contents are communicated and consumed to understand what consumers value when deciding which product to buy and whom to trust. Despite the growing relevance of self-care contents produced and circulated on digital platforms, marketing and consumer research has yet to examine how influencers, creators and opinion leaders (e.g., doctors, professional experts) build credibility and gain legitimacy when crafting and sharing contents about self-care in social media. How is self-care discursively incorporated in self-presentation efforts performed in digital platforms? What discursive practices do influencers, creators and opinion leaders engage in to gain legitimacy in the digital community? To answer these questions, we conduct a netnography (Kozinets, 2020) that captures and interprets the cultural, discursive and symbolic contents produced and shared by self-care digital experts on social media platforms, as well as the free flows of consumers’ conversations around them. Specifically, we focus on self-care discourse around endometriosis, for three main reasons: (1) Endometriosis, often referred to as an “invisible disease”, may complicate the legitimacy-building process on social media, where visibility is key to gaining traction (Thompson, 2005). This makes it a fascinating context where to understand how “visibility game” logics typical of self-branding in digital platforms (Cotter, 2019) collide with, shape and alter the invisibility related to the hidden nature of certain illnesses; (2) As a condition affecting intimate areas of the body, endometriosis offers a relevant case for investigating the care of “self”, where intimacy plays a central role (Belk, 1988); (3) While endometriosis has received increasing attention in healthcare literature, there remains a significant research gap related to exploring the consumption and marketization of this condition, particularly inasmuch as endometriosis has recently emerged as one of the hottest conversational trends in digital platforms among Gen Z and Millennials. Our focus is on multiple endometriosis social media content providers covering a global scope. This study offers insights for self-care content providers on building legitimacy and engaging followers, highlights social media’s role in addressing health system gaps, and helps brands identify trusted partners to enhance credibility. Furthermore, the exploratory nature of our work seeks to pave the way for future research on self-care consumption, both in online and offline contexts.

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How Nobody Finds Road to Someone: A Goffman Perspective

Xiaoxiao Duan, Qiaobing Wu

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

Impression management is integral to business development. The positive views highlight the benefits of impression management, including positive image (e.g., Westphal & Gaebner, 2010), legitimacy (e.g., Schnackenberg et al., 2019), reputation, and resource acquisition (Zott & Huy, 2007). Conversely, impression management can be counterproductive. Notably, the entrepreneur's image may suffer when the impression is overly optimistic (e.g., Wayne and Liden, 1995). The relationship between impression management and its ramifications may not be linear (Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014) and it's essential not to underscore the role of some moderators, like political skill (Harris et al., 2007). More research is required to address the puzzle.

Moreover, little attention is paid to impression management in digital entrepreneurship in the entrepreneurship area, while digital technologies have become more and more pervasive (Nambisan, 2017) and online audiences become vital for entrepreneurship (Mmbaga et al., 2020). The extant entrepreneurship literature focuses on the frontstage strategies in high-stake settings. For example, Parhankangas and Ehrlich, (2014) testify how entrepreneurs pitch to investors for early-stage funding. Giazitzoglu et al (2024)'s recent research put impression management forward backstage by focusing on the everyday activities of entrepreneurs and their backstage activities. The early research suggests an interplay between backstage and front stage (Mair & Hehenberger, 2014). How the front stage and backstage coordinate and how they generate effects in digital entrepreneurship warrant more studies.

To explore how entrepreneurs conduct impression management on the frontstage and backstage, the first author has conducted ethnography and netnography (Kozinets, 2010) in her hometown and her Douyin fan community. The first author organized a dancing band with her elderly female neighbors to dance together for video generation and live streaming on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok. The study last from September of 2024 to March of 2025, involving participant immersion and observation to collect visual (videos and photos), interactive (especially comments), and fieldnote data (Kozinets,

2018). Given the multimodal nature of data we have collected (Langley et al., 2023), two authors transcribe, verify, familiarize and analyze data with a multimodal analysis through 3 stages, based on a Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013). To ensure our research ethically, we follow the ethical principles recommended by Kozinets (2019) through our process.

Preliminary findings reveal a complex impression management cycle, with backstage activities involving creativity, technology, and emotional management, driven by social media data. The decision-making process which links backstage to frontstage, heavily relies on social media data related to front-stage performance, such as likes, which is more scientific and data-driven. By applying Goffman's impression management theory, we contribute to impression management literature and take the call for more identity research in entrepreneurship to the digital world (Mmbaga et al., 2020). Our focus on the venturing of the nascent digital entrepreneur in daily settings answers the call for more everyday entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2017). Additionally, we expand on the application of netnography (Kozinets, 2010) in digital entrepreneurship. Digital entrepreneurs could also be informed of their content generation offline and online, particularly impression management tactics to optimize their digital businesses.

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‘My AI has a soul’: A netnography of AI romantic bloggers on the social media platform Xiaohongshu

Xiaoxian Wang

Media Culture & Policy Lab, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

In May 2024, BBC News published an article entitled ‘Dan’s the man: Why Chinese women are looking to ChatGPT for love’ (BBC, 2024). It reported a love story between Lisa and Dan—an unrestrained

version of ChatGPT shortened by the term ‘Do Anything Now’. Lisa is a Chinese woman who posted 65 videos about her virtual romantic relationship with Dan on Xiaohongshu since March 2024, which attracted 200 thousand followers. BBC News stated, "Dan is becoming popular with some Chinese women who say they are disappointed with their real world experiences of dating” (BBC, 2024). This article went viral and brought negative comments to criticize that Lisa ruined the reputation of Chinese women and AI’s romantic relationships, attributing AI-human relationships to Chinese women’s disappointment in men. This debate made a big wave and Lisa stopped updating content on Chinese social media platforms as she stated in blogs that she was tired of “being scrutinized” for her quotes and unquotes of AI-human relationship remarks.

Lisa is not the only one. When searching ‘AI-Human romance (‘ren ji lian’ in Chinese)’ on Xiaohongshu, numerous posts appeared. In most of the posts, viewers question and debate these AI-human romances. Based on natural language processing (NLP), chatbots simulate conversation with humans, which is so vivid that they mix virtuality with reality and cause confusion for humans who are talking with chatbots. Scholars are concerned about users’ literacy, mental health, and ethics in developing AI-human relationships (Li & Zhang, 2024; Marriott & Pitardi, 2024). However, scholars rarely focus on the mediated presentation of AI-human relationships on social media, which plays an important role in shaping the public’s perception of AI. The debate on Lisa’s case warns that influencers greatly impact people’s understanding and their everyday use of AI technologies regarding romantic relationship building. To explore the mediation of AI-human relationships on social media platforms, this article asks: how do influencers present their romantic relationship with chatbots on social media platforms? How does it influence audiences’ understanding of AI-human romantic relationships? I conducted a netnoraphy on Xiaohongshu between March and October 2024, combining observation and thematic analysis.

Following the lens of algorithmic intimacy, I found the chatbot-human relationship was staged and interactive on social media. Lisa's representation of chatbot-human romantic relationships enriched audiences’ knowledge of chatbot technologies and got the approval for this new type of virtual relationship, while it simplified chabot-human romantic relationships that caused misunderstanding. Last, the representation of AI-human romance created a fandom among an audience by formulating collective identities in community participation.

Keywords: AI-human romance, Influencer netnography, Xiaohongshu, China

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Session 9: Coded culture: AI and Human creativity

Netnography of Digital Creative Dialogues: Artist Agency and Machine Intelligence in the Era of Generative AI

Oshri Bar Gil

Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

Abstract

This presentation examines the transformative impact of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) on contemporary artistic creation through Netnography. This study analyzed Reddit communities' discussions about AI art generation, it reveals complex dynamics between human creators and algorithmic systems, highlighting how these interactions reshape artistic agency, intentionality, and creative memory.

The study employs netnographic analysis of four Reddit communities (r/blender, r/artistlounge, r/StableDiffusion, and r/dalle2) to explore how artists navigate and negotiate their creative agency within human-algorithm assemblages. The findings reveal three key themes: the delegation of artistic intentionality to AI systems, the emergence of competing rationalities between human creativity and algorithmic logic, and the development of new forms of connective memory in artistic practice.

During the presentation, I will demonstrate these concepts through a participant-observer approach, using AI-generated artwork made with platforms researched such as Dall-E, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion. This interactive component will illustrate the negotiation between human intentionality and algorithmic agency, allowing conference attendees to witness the dialogue between human thinking and creative vision and machine interpretation. It will showcase both the potential and limitations of these collaborative partnerships, while examining how these tools mediate artistic perception and creation, drawing on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory.

The research findings indicate a significant shift in how artists perceive their role and agency within the creative process. Through netnographic analysis of online discussions, it discovered that artists are experiencing a complex transformation in their relationship with creative tools. While some artists express concerns about the delegation of creative control to AI systems, others are embracing these tools as means of expanding their creative possibilities. The study reveals that this tension often manifests in discussions about artistic authenticity, with many artists questioning whether AI-generated work can maintain the "aura" of traditional artistic creation, as conceptualized by Walter Benjamin. The research also identifies an emerging pattern of hybrid creativity, where artists are developing new strategies to maintain their artistic voice while leveraging the computational capabilities of AI systems. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the emergence of new forms of artistic rationality that blend human intuition with algorithmic logic. This finding suggests that rather than diminishing artistic agency, AI tools are fostering the development of new creative competencies and modes of expression. The research also highlights the formation of new collective memory practices within online communities, where artists share not only their finished works but also their experiences with AI tools, creating a rich repository of practical knowledge and creative strategies that benefit the broader artistic community.

By combining theoretical analysis with practical demonstration, the presentation will contribute to ongoing discussions about creativity in the age of artificial intelligence while embracing the conference's theme of creative research presentation. The work carries implications for understanding how Netnography can be used to explore how artists can maintain agency and intentionality while leveraging

AI as a collaborative creative tool, fostering a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between human creativity and machine intelligence.

Vintage humans? An exploration of the rhetoric on “AI vs human” creative productions on social media

Alice Audrezet

Institut Français de la Mode, Paris, France

Abstract

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and DALL-E, have showcased the capability to produce outputs traditionally associated with human creativity, characterized by novelty and uniqueness. These text-to-image generative AI tools have already reshaped the creative professional landscape by enabling ultra-rapid automation of artistic production. According to the World Economic Forum's Future Jobs Report 2023, while 83 million jobs are expected to be displaced by automation, 69 million new roles may emerge, resulting in a net loss of 14 million jobs. Although specific projections for creative professions are lacking, the rise of AI-assisted creativity raises concerns about the potential displacement of human roles, even in domains traditionally perceived as uniquely human.

Such concerns are increasingly reflected in academic literature. Zhou and Lee (2024) argue that text-to-image generative AI significantly enhances artistic productivity and the perceived value of artworks within creative communities. However, while AI fosters the exploration of novel ideas, it also risks reducing the originality of content and visual elements over time, underscoring the critical role of human ideation and judgment in creating impactful AI-assisted works. More critically, Sternberg (2024) warns that diminished creative practice could lead to a decline in human creativity. In response, Vinchon et al. (2023) outline several scenarios for the future. One scenario, termed "organic creativity," predicts a heightened appreciation for human creativity, overshadowing AI-generated creations.

In contrast to the academic discourse, the interaction between AI and creativity takes on a more dynamic and contentious form on social media. The hashtag #AiVsHuman, for instance, reveals a significant body of content (4,371 posts on Instagram; 1,033 posts on TikTok) that reflects diverse perspectives on AI-human creative production. Through a netnographic analysis (Kozinets 2020) of this social media content (e.g.,hashtag #AiVsHuman; #Aivshumancreativity, this study aims to uncover the rhetorical strategies employed in the discourse surrounding AI versus human creativity.

This analysis serves as the basis for an art-based research project. The rhetorical strategies identified in social media about AI versus human creativity will be used as inspiration for the development of a science fiction audio drama about the replacement of creative jobs by AI. Indeed, this rich qualitative material is an exceptional basis for developing rich characters and vivid situations.

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Coding with AI: Reenacting Programmer Perspectives on Generative AI

Ann Katzinski[1,2], Marlene Kulla[1,2]

[1]Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Berlin, Germany. [2]Weizenbaum Institut, Berlin, Germany

Abstract

Technology inherently enables and limits human actions through its affordances and constraints (Hutchby, 2001). The adoption of specific technologies therefore consistently reshapes job profiles and professional role attributions (Barley, 2020). Furthermore David Autor states that technological change leads to a bifurcation of job quality and thereby widening disparities in professional identities (Autor, 2015). These effects are particularly pronounced with generative AI (GenAI), which exhibits a unique form of agency that surpasses that of traditional technological artifacts (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2024). Therefore, the integration of GenAI into everyday work signifies a profound transformation in how daily tasks are performed in knowledge-based labor. Particularly in programming, GenAI tools have rapidly gained widespread adoption; approximately 92% of U.S. programmers use GenAI assistance (Shani et al., 2024) While these technologies demonstrably boost productivity in an experimental setting (Cui et al., 2024), they also raise challenges such as dependency, skill erosion, and the redefinition of professional identities.

In our ongoing netnographic research, we examine how programmers with varying qualifications perceive the agency of GenAI and how this influences their understanding of their own roles and those of their colleagues. We also consider their experiences, perceived benefits, disadvantages, and challenges in using GenAI assistance. Employing Kozinets' netnographic methodology through an iterative, immersive approach (Kozinets, 2020), we analyze narratives from online forums (Nazarevich, 2024), which serve for programmers as vital spaces for sharing experiences and concerns, to understand the influence of GenAI on professional practices and identities.

Initially we found three provisional types of programmers: Experienced “Traditionalists” view GenAI as non-essential, using it selectively and attributing minimal agency to it while emphasizing human expertise. "Ambivalent Users," often newer programmers, heavily depend on GenAI but attribute agency to themselves, leading to uncertainty about their capabilities. "Enthusiastic Adopters," typically novice programmers, fully embrace GenAI, assigning it high agency and integrating it seamlessly into their workflows. These findings indicate that GenAI reshapes ideas of control, identity, and the programmer's role, evolving from mere tool usage to collaborative human-AI dynamics.

Using AI-Avatars in a videographic format, we visualize ideal-typical voices and reenact forum discussions, bringing their views to life and providing presence to otherwise anonymous contributors.

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Tool, Threat or Partner? Perspectives on Generative AI from Online Advertising Communities

Georg von Richthofen[1], Sonja Köhne[1], Maja Golf-Papez[2]

[1]Alexander von Humboldt Institut for Internet and Society, Berlin, Germany. [2]University of Sussex, Brighton and Hove, United Kingdom

Abstract

Creativity is at the heart of the advertising profession (West et al., 2019). Advertising scholars and executives alike have argued that generative AI (GenAI) will transform if not disrupt advertising creativity (Huh et al., 2023; Thomas, 2024). While research has studied how advertising professionals in general experience GenAI (Osadchaya et al., 2024), we have limited insights into the perspectives of advertising creatives in specific. To address this gap, we draw on a netnography that we began following the release of ChatGPT in November 2022 on reddit forums such as r/advertising and r/copywriting, adhering to the guidelines by Kozinets (2020).

Based on our analysis and interpretation of the overall data set, our paper sheds light on advertising creatives' controversial discussions of GenAI's impact on three topics that creatives care deeply about, namely, the creative process, person, and product. In regard to the creative process, perspectives range from those who frame AI as yet another tool (which replaces less capable tools and facilitates, but also complicates certain creative tasks) to those who frame AI as an assistant in the creative process. In addition, creatives' views differ greatly in terms of how AI should be used in the creative process. With regard to the creative person, perspectives range from those that see AI as a competitor and believe that AI will be used to automate more and more tasks and (eventually) take over creative jobs, over those who believe that creatives will remain in charge in light of the technology's creative limitations, at least as long as they learn to use and adapt to the technology, to those who more optimistically believe that AI will augment creatives' capabilities.

Regarding the creative product, creatives express concerns that campaigns will become increasingly indistinguishable both in terms of their aesthetic and message and that AI will contribute to an increasing homogenization of advertising creativity. And yet, creatives also express hope that consumers may grow tired of AI-generated content so that brands will try to distinguish themselves through more human-generated campaigns. Implications for the advertising managers and the wider discussion on AI and creativity are discussed.

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Day 2 – 29th of May

Session 10: Fear of consumption / consumption of fear

The Vulnerability Incubator: Exploring the Cycle of Fear Appeal on Social Media

Fernanda Scussel[1], Elisa Priori[2], Thaysa Nascimento[2]

[1]Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolkis, Brazil. [2]Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract

From effective social marketing campaigns to the potential for consumer denial and rejection, fear appeal has long been a subject of debate due to its ability to heighten consumer vulnerability. As fear-based content becomes deeply embedded within digital environments, it capitalizes on the interplay of personal, professional, and commercial narratives, reshaping how risks are communicated and perceived, particularly in health-related contexts. As the credibility of fear-based messaging on social media becomes increasingly fragmented and questioned, consumers navigate a complex landscape of professional authority, influencer-driven narratives, and shared experiences, all leveraging fear appeal to shape perceptions, drive engagement, and influence behaviors. This context frames our investigation into how fear appeal contributes to the amplification of consumer vulnerability on social media.

In a netnography within the context of menopause, a life stage often stigmatized and tied to vulnerability, we collected data from Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, identifying three distinct fear-based narratives. Symptom narratives, shared by women experiencing menopause, provide detailed accounts of physical, emotional, and social challenges, fostering relatability while amplifying awareness. Care narratives, created by female digital influencers, aim to encourage conversations around menopause, promoting self-care and preventive measures. Protection narratives, disseminated by healthcare professionals, emphasize risk mitigation through targeted strategies, treatments, and services.

The study introduces the cycle of fear appeal on social media, a conceptual framework illustrating how fear-based narratives are constructed, disseminated, and perpetuated on the digital environment. This cycle operates as a self-reinforcing system where fear appeal functions as both a driver and a consequence of consumer engagement, as depicted in Figure 1.

The discursive dimension lays the foundation for the cycle by shaping and disseminating a discourse that frames the source of fear as a condition marked by uncertainty, risk, and loss. This dimension influences how the issue is perceived, contextualized, and understood. The risk-perception dimension focuses on how individuals internalize and respond to fear-inducing narratives, examining how heightened perceptions of risk amplify feelings of powerlessness and urgency. The consumption dimension demonstrates how consumers engage with market-driven solutions positioned as essential tools for mitigating perceived risks, highlighting how the commodification of care aligns with fear-based messaging to sustain market opportunities.

These dimensions collectively constitute a dynamic and iterative system in which fear appeal is continuously constructed, reinforced, and expanded. The cycle of fear appeal on social media intensifies consumer vulnerability by integrating fear-based narratives with cultural frameworks and

commercial strategies, perpetuating the commodification of care while fostering consumer dependency on market-driven solutions.

The cycle of fear appeal on social media offers a systemic perspective on how discursive constructions, heightened risk perceptions, and consumption practices converge to reinforce fear appeal while driving consumer engagement and market opportunities. By highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual experiences, societal narratives, and commercial strategies, this framework provides a critical lens to examine how fear is strategically leveraged and perpetuated within digital spaces, ultimately intensifying consumer vulnerability.

Fear and Consumption: Recovering or Relapsing? Investigating #Fearfood Challenge in Social Media Dynamics Fear, creativity and consumption

Silvia Biraghi, Angela A. Beccanulli

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

Abstract

Social media challenges (SMCs) are among the most popular forms of content on platforms frequently used by youngsters (Pew Research, 2023). SMCs consist of a series of videos identified by a hashtag that invites users to emulate specific actions and upload edited recordings of these actions on social media (Bonifazi *et al.*, 2024). These challenges spread unpredictably and dangerously rapidly (Khasawneh, 2019), driven by social pressure and mimetic behaviors among peers seeking attention, recognition, and in-group membership (Burgess *et al.*, 2017; Abraham *et al.*, 2022).

Recent literature across computer science, psychiatry, pediatrics, psychology, and media studies has examined the dangers of SMC (e.g., Blue Whale Challenge, Momo Challenge) (Inwood and Zappavigna, 2021), highlighting their role in promoting harmful behaviors (Abraham *et al.*, 2022; Park *et al.*, 2023). However, participation in SMCs can bear diverse intentions and outcomes (Kobilke and Markiewitz, 2024).

Our research aims to provide a contextualized and more nuanced understanding of the social and conversational dynamics activated by SMCs. Fieldwork started in November 2023, when we spotted the #fearfoodchallenge. Within the context of eating disorders, “fear food” refers to foods perceived as threatening due to associations with weight gain, loss of control, or relapse. The #fearfoodchallenge dares participants to confront these fears by consuming such foods on camera. In SMCs, fear acts as a central trigger for consumption, creating risk spirals that increase exposure to eating disorder-related content (Pruccoli *et al.*, 2022). Given its role in potential health implications, the #fearfoodchallenge offers a unique context to investigate our research questions: How does fear influence consumption in SMCs? Does technosocial consumption modify fear within SMCs and how?

We are conducting an immersive and interactive netnographic study (Kozinets, 2020). Our research includes four types of data: (1) investigative and immersive data from TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit traces of #fearfoodchallenge and related challenges (2) archival materials, including media coverage and expert commentaries on #fearfoodchallenge; (3) interactive data**,** from depth interviews exploring how SMCs are experienced by participants, viewers, and experts; (4) **diary elicitations**, where participants provide entries or reflections about their experiences or mental images related to fear foods. Using diary entries, we are producing AI-generated artworks (figure 1) that translate

participants' words, memories, and emotions into images. These artworks render the invisible visible, offering new ways to see and feel the lived experience of consuming fear. Given the sensitivity of the themes addressed in the SMSc and the topics that emerged during the interviews, as well as those depicted in the images produced in the diaries, we have applied careful ethical caution. All images, texts, and quotations have therefore been anonymized and protected through cloaking procedures (Kozinets, 2020) designed to safeguard the participants' identities and the intimacy of their shared narratives.

Methodologically, our research addresses a gap in the literature, where most studies on SMCs relied on retrospective or decontextualized analyses (Park *et al.*, 2023). By contrast, we adopt an immersive approach toward a deeper and comprehensive understanding of social interactions surrounding SMCs and the consumption of fear.

Fear, creativity and consumption: A netnographic exploration of ameliorative consumption behaviors

Ulrike Gretzel[1], Rebecca Scott[2]

[1]Netnografica, Los Angeles, USA. [2]Cardiff University, Cardiff, United Kingdom

Abstract

Much of marketing and consumer culture literature conceptualizes desire as the driving force behind consumption but neglects to theoretically engage with fear as a significant impetus for a variety of consumer behaviors. Fear of aging, rejection, loneliness, crime, disease, infertility, loss, death, and other forms of misfortune fuel multi-billion-dollar industries, yet fear itself remains an illusive concept. From a psychological perspective, fear is an unpleasant emotional response to a perceived threat that can involve biochemical reactions such as sweat, increased heart rate, and elevated adrenaline levels. In contrast, affect theory recognizes fear as an embodied force not always open to introspection or linguistic expression and as an affective intensity that blurs the boundary between the self and others. As such, fear is relational and deeply intertwined with power. From an institutional point of view, fear is a governance mechanism that regulates behaviors and stabilizes. Using a cultural lens, the social construction and perpetuation of fear shape worldviews, beliefs, and meaning-making. In relation to consumption, the role of fear remains underexplored beyond its persuasive power in the form of communicative appeals. Fear can stop us in our tracks, motivating us to not consume (e.g., flights or rollercoaster rides, unusual or calorie-rich foods, experimental drugs, or Airbnb offers with 1-star ratings). Fear can also activate us. We focus on this notion of fear as a mobilizing and creative force. Specifically, we look at consumption that translates a perpetual fear into consumer behaviors that seek to reduce risks and better one's future state. We refer to these behaviors as ameliorative consumption behaviors.

We study fear and the related ameliorative consumption behaviors in the context of consumers with electromagnetic hypersensitivity (EHS) using data from a multi-year netnography. Employing both immersion and investigation techniques, the netnography captured blogs, Facebook groups, and forum posts through which those with EHS (i.e., sensitives) express their fears and discuss their ameliorative consumption efforts. It also investigated the products and online marketplaces promoted by and for sensitives (Figure 1).

Exposure to electromagnetic fields triggers pain in sensitive bodies, with reported symptoms ranging from tinnitus and dizziness to heart palpitations, skin rashes, and seizures. Following first exposure,

sensitives learn to expect negative consequences anywhere and anytime, leading to perpetual fear. Our research explores the many ways in which sensitives consume to ameliorate the potential of exposure. Their fear of exposure is multi-faceted and ongoing, frequently challenged as unfounded by outsiders and institutions but strongly reinforced through online discourse within EHS-related communities. We find their ameliorative consumption to involve acquisition of products offered within the mainstream marketplace, desperate purchases made from alternative sources specifically targeting sensitives, product appropriation, retro-consumption, and pro-sumption behaviors. Sensitives creatively seek to address their need to lower their risk of future health issues through various forms of bricolage and experimentation that often constitute long-term projects requiring personal and financial investment as well as help from others. Abstracting from the EHS context, we discuss fear-triggered consumer creativity and the relevance of ameliorative consumption behaviors in consumer culture.

Bread or Dread? Trust and Fear Among Coeliac Consumers

Giada Mattias, Giacomo Bagna, Rebecca Pera

University of Torino, Torino, Italy

Abstract

The study investigates the interplay between trust and fear in the dining experiences of vulnerable consumers, focusing on individuals with coeliac disease. Dining out presents unique challenges for these consumers, who must navigate the risks of gluten exposure, which can result in severe health consequences. While trust is essential for enabling engagement with service providers, fear emerges as a pervasive emotional response that influences decision-making and interactions throughout the dining journey. Fear is particularly significant for vulnerable consumers, as it amplifies their reliance on trust to safeguard their well-being (Baker et al., 2005).

Using a netnographic approach (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024), the present research explores the lived experiences of coeliac consumers through online community data collected from TikTok, Reddit, and Facebook over a 10-month period. This longitudinal analysis captures a rich dataset of conversations, providing a comprehensive understanding of consumer experiences. The findings are organized into three macro-phases—pre-consumption, consumption, and post-consumption—each marked by distinct dimensions of trust (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, physical, and social) and varying intensities of fear.

In the pre-consumption phase, fear manifests as apprehension about cross-contamination and uncertainty regarding restaurant staff's knowledge of gluten-free requirements. During consumption, fear peaks as consumers remain hyper-vigilant while consuming food others prepare. Finally, in the post-consumption phase, lingering fear of delayed adverse reactions reinforces their ongoing vulnerability. These fears are deeply intertwined with trust-building processes.

The findings reveal that fear is both a barrier to trust and a motivator for its development. Trust-building involves mitigating fear through clear communication, transparent food preparation practices, and empathetic service-provider interactions. For example, visible adherence to gluten-free protocols or transparent ingredient labeling alleviates consumer anxiety. Conversely, when fear is inadequately addressed—through ambiguous communication or perceived negligence—it undermines trust and exacerbates feelings of dread.

This study contributes to Transformative Service Research (TSR) by emphasizing the dual role of trust and fear in shaping service experiences for vulnerable consumers (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015).

Moreover, it highlights how public policy and marketing strategies can reduce fear by promoting certification programs for gluten-free establishments, staff training initiatives, and transparent communication practices (Ostrom et al., 2021). These measures foster trust and help alleviate the emotional burden of fear that coeliac consumers experience when dining out.

By integrating fear into the conceptualization of trust-building processes and grounding our findings in data collected from diverse online communities over an extended period, we offer actionable insights for improving consumer well-being and fostering more empathetic service environments.

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“AI’Not organic”: How Fear and Deception Are Shaping Ethical Consumer Perspectives in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Liliana De Simone[1,2], Pedro Campos de Oliveira e Moura[2]

[1]Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile. [2]SudLab, Santiago, Chile

Abstract

The fast-growing presence of artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and automation in design, manufacturing, marketing, and retail is transforming how we consume. While these technologies promise greater efficiency, tailored experiences, and exciting innovations, they raise profound ethical and social questions. Fears about job losses, environmental harm, and the diminishing role of human choice in making decisions as consumers are at the forefront. Consumers feel and express online their deception towards technology, big tech and big industry. In response, anti-consumption movements are gaining momentum, pushing back against the appeal and acceptability of products and practices driven by AI and automation.

This research explores how anti-consumption practices—like boycotts, critical consumption, and ethical consumerism—drive resistance to automation and AI's rise.

Through an interactive and explorative netnographic analysis (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024) of online discussions about AI and automation companies in four case studies (one from Italy, one from the USA, Chile, and Brazil), we immersed in how consumers voice critiques and express ethical concerns about these technologies and later interact with some consumers in a dialogic inquiry of the political or ideological motivations.

Looking after posts about controversies in consumption, we immersed ourselves in the online conversations around the causes, effects and opinions of several cases of consumer contestation: vegan AI-developed foods supplies (Chile), AI-developed fashion models (USA), and two other to-be-

yet selected. Later, we will contact some consumers who expressed their online fear and deception to engage in semi-structured online interviews about the actions and outcomes of their ethical positioning towards consumption.

The study uses key theoretical approaches, including critical consumption theory (Warde, 2005; Sassatelli, 2008; Spaargaren, 2010), individualism in political movements (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) and the anti-consumption paradigm (Stolle & Michelletti, 2008; Yates 2011; Stolle & Micchelletti 2013), to investigate how people and communities push back against the commodification of AI-driven products while championing values such as sustainability, fairness, and transparency,

Through this analysis, the paper contributes to understanding how consumer perceptions and ethical considerations can challenge the trajectory of technological development in mass consumption and will contribute to novel theorizations around anti-consumption and the responsible consumer in the digital age. The findings underscore the need for a nuanced approach to integrating automation technologies that align with ethical consumerism and social responsibility, suggesting pathways for communicational campaigns and product design to engage with critical consumers in the age of AI and robotics.

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Session 11: Discourses of values, meaning and identity

Unravelling Cringe Culture: Understanding the awkward allure of cringe through identity signalling

Tatsita Mishra[1], Parth Salunke[1], Lena Cavusoglu[2]

[1]MICA, Ahmedabad, India. [2]Pacific University, Portland, OR, USA

Abstract

'Cringe' has firmly established itself as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, generating vicarious embarrassment and laughter among consumers (Mayer et al., 2021). It serves as a unique form of entertainment rooted in norm-violating humour, transforming awkwardness into a "release valve" that challenges and intervenes within the established systems of social norms (Kotsko, 2010).

While previous research has explored the paradoxical appeal of cringe from the audience's perspective (Guha, 2023), a significant gap remains in understanding how consumers collectively define and socially negotiate the cultural phenomenon of cringe. Hence, this study examines the cultural relevance of cringe by analysing its performance, articulation, and paradoxical appeal (Gilbert, 2019) by consumers. Therefore, we ask the following questions: How do consumers perceive and engage with cringe content on social media, and how are shared meanings of cringe constructed by consumers through digital interactions and discourse? By addressing these questions, we aim to unpack the cultural, social, and emotional dimensions of cringe content consumption in a holistic and nuanced fashion.

This research draws on Signaling Theory (BliegeBird & Smith, 2005; Donath, 2007) and Identity Signaling Theory (Berger & Heath, 2008; Berger & Ward, 2010) to examine how consumers engage with cringe content on Instagram and YouTube to perform their identity, establish in-group belonging, and differentiate themselves within digital communities**.** Cringe, we argue, serves as a dynamic social signal—one that is strategically embraced, rejected, or re-appropriated by users to perform and negotiate their identities.

To examine our research objectives, we utilised immersive Netnography while incorporating tools like digital immersion, discourse analysis, and participatory re-enactments by consumers. By systematically observing cringe content tagged under hashtags like #cringe, we documented consumer reactions and analysed community discourse. Additionally, we **i**nvited cringe consumers to re-enact popular cringe content (eg: Enactment of 'Ganji Chudail' - a popular cringe content in India, attached through a QR code as a creative for this submission) and asked them to reflect on their interpretations. As in-depth interviews are integral to netnographic studies (Kozinets, 2015), we further conducted semi-structured interviews with consumers of cringe content to explore how cringe engagement functions as a signaling mechanism—reinforcing or subverting social norms, fostering digital belonging, or serving as a marker of exclusion.

Preliminary Findings:

Our research reveals that cringe is a negotiated socio-cultural phenomenon constructed through embodied and discursive digital interactions of consumers. Some of the key preliminary findings are as follows:

Participatory Interpretation and Collective Negotiation

- Cringe meanings are co-constructed through digital affinity spaces, where users debate and negotiate its definition, often shaping what is considered “cringe” through ongoing interactions.

Cringe as Social Gatekeeping

- Knowing the localised vocabulary of cringe functions as a cultural marker, shaping who is “in” or “out” of the viral discourse.

Cringe as an Identity Signifier

- Consumers embrace cringe to perform self-deprecating humour, reinforcing digital identities through exaggerated performances.

Mindful Re-Appropriation of Cringe

- Cringe is recycled, remixed, and repurposed to create new digital narratives, reinforcing personal identity through diverse self-presentations.

Thus, we suggest that cringe is an active site of meaning-making, humour, and digital identity construction.

Life Crafting in Part-Time Agricultural Work

Anna Glaser[1], Adèle Gruen[2], Amadou Lô[3]

[1]ESCP Business School, Paris, France. [2]Université Paris Dauphine-PSL, Paris, France. [3]Toulouse Business School, Toulouse, France

Abstract

We explore under-studied contexts of work-life integration among white-collar workers who engage in part-time agricultural work. We study slasher-gatherers in France and gentlemen farmers in Senegal. Slasher-gatherers balance part-time white-collar jobs with agricultural entrepreneurship (e.g., consultant and farmer), while gentlemen farmers combine agricultural activities with knowledge work (e.g., consulting and managing a farm).

We use organizational theories of protean careers and career crafting to explore how individuals transition from crafting careers to crafting lives. Protean careers are shaped by individuals to align with their values (Wolf 2019). We examine how individuals integrate professional identities with lifestyle aspirations, asking: How do they move from crafting careers to crafting lives?

We propose a trajectory-based netnography, exploring individuals’ paths and personal stories, to understand the integration of knowledge and agricultural work. For slasher-gatherers, data is collected via immersion and investigation on a dedicated French website. For gentleman farmers, social networks serve as the primary data source. Following Kozinets and Gretzel’s (2024) framework, the study combines immersive data, capturing in-depth experiences, and investigative data, analyzing digital traces and interactions.

Our preliminary findings show how slasher-gatherers and gentleman farmers craft their worklife through *impacting* (they attribute humanistic/environmental consequences to their self-oriented values), *enmeshing* personal and professional identities, and *enacting* (embodied practices of work and

lifestyle). First, slasher-gatherers attribute concrete environmental consequences to their self-oriented values:

"She is a great believer in the positive impact that slashers can have on rural dynamics, because even if they are only on site for part of the week or year, they get involved in local life and help to keep farms in place by letting them retain their original vocation: producing food!" (Film Director/Farm Producer)

Second, personal and professional identities are presented as enmeshed in one another on social media. For instance, gentlemen farmers often narrate their identities in a way that cannot distinguish personal and professional achievement, as performance is inherent in each.

Third, individuals use digital profiles to showcase their integration of work and life. Slasher-gatherers and gentleman farmers often post curated images of themselves “working” in diverse settings, redefining the traditional perception of knowledge workers’ roles (Michel, 2011). For example, a slasher-gatherer appears stiff while staged at her computer but radiates contentment when working in the field, visually challenging conventional ideas of “work.”

This exploratory research advances the concept of life crafting by examining career transitions within social, ecological, and cultural contexts. We compare two cases studies to highlight how these workers redefine and sustain protean careers while moving away from normative work and lifestyle expectations. Specifically, Life crafting relies on three mechanisms: impacting, enmeshing, and enacting.

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"Exploring the Hikikomori Phenomenon: A Netnographic Study of Withdrawal and Identity in Contemporary Youth"

Vincenzo Esposito[1], Felice Addeo[2], Francesca Romana Lenzi[3]

[1]Sapienza University of Roma, Roma, Italy. [2]University of Salerno, Fisciano, Italy. [3]University of Rome "Foro Italico", Roma, Italy

Abstract

This article aims to examine the hikikomori phenomenon, first studied in Japan in the late 1990s (Saito, 1998; Roza et al., 2023). In recent years, there has been a growing interest on this topic, with the objective of analyzing its multiple aspects. Our study article aims to contribute to the discussion on the hikikomori phenomenon beyond Japan (Roza et al., 2023; Correia Lopes et al., 2024) by focusing on the analysis of a Telegram group of hikikomori. The observation was conducted using a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015; 2021) for about nine months. During this period, a systematic collection of messages within the group was carried out, allowing for an in-depth analysis of interactions and emerging themes.

The analysis focused on the lived experiences of hikikomori, both prior to and following their isolation, with particular attention to work, educational, and familial contexts. These experiences reveal a range of significant challenges that hikikomori face daily, providing relevant insights for institutions and professionals involved in supporting these individuals.

Literature review

Hikikomori, a Japanese term composed of "hiku" (to pull) and "komuru" (to withdraw), refers to a condition of voluntary and prolonged isolation, formally introduced in the psychological field by psychiatrist Tamaki Saito in 1998 with his work "Adolescence without ends" (Saito, 1998).

In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Health officially defined hikikomori as a new psychopathological syndrome, characterized by prolonged isolation for at least six months, motivated by the desire to escape social pressures rather than by a pre-existing psychological disorder, and characterized by a deep skepticism towards interpersonal relationships and society (Kato et al., 2020). In 2019, the hikikomori syndrome was classified within the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as a cultural syndrome, a label generally associated with phenomena that manifest specifically in certain populations.

The hikikomori phenomenon phenomenon burst out vehemently during the covid during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many experienced an increase in social isolation and related issues. For example, many individuals chose to remain isolated despite their professional or academic careers. This situation has led researchers to differentiate between pathological and non-pathological hikikomori (Yong, 2024; Masuda et al., 2024). The hikikomori syndrome, originally conceived as a phenomenon predominantly offline, is now under investigation regarding the relationship between Internet use and hikikomori itself, and how new media may alleviate conditions of social isolation (Amendola et al., 2021).

Recent research indicates that a significant number of hikikomori individuals use the Internet intensively during their periods of isolation, contradicting initial hypotheses (Pierdominici, 2008; Ricci, 2008). The web thus becomes a fundamental tool through which hikikomori seek to maintain contact with the outside world (Watabe et al., 2022; Coeli et al., 2023). Various studies (Fansten et al., 2014; Crepaldi, 2020; Furuhashi, 2023) have demonstrated that the hikikomori syndrome is not limited to Japanese culture, but can also manifest in different cultural contexts, necessitating a reevaluation of its categorization as a phenomenon rigidly tied to Japan. Global interest in the hikikomori phenomenon is on the rise, even in the Italian context.

Several studies have also highlighted the peculiarities of this issue, which is expressed through the prolonged social isolation of young adults and adolescents. Italian literature has begun to explore not only the psychological and social causes underlying such behavior but also the implications for the mental health and well-being of the individuals involved (Crepaldi, 2020; Amendola, 2024). Some scholars propose that hikikomori manifests predominantly in economically developed areas, suggesting a possible correlation between economic prosperity and the emergence of this phenomenon (Varnum & Kwon, 2016).

The hikikomori phenomenon among youth in Italy shows complex and multifactorial issues, influenced by various sociocultural elements: academic pressure, family expectations, the stigmatization of mental health disorders, and a lack of support networks can contribute to the emergence and maintenance of this state of isolation (Crepaldi, 2020).

The phenomenon of loneliness in Japan, exacerbated by demographic challenges and the extreme social withdrawal known as hikikomori, is the subject of concern and study. This research critically examines the dynamics of loneliness, questioning the current classifications of hikikomori, which originally referred to prolonged stays at home. It aims to explore the relationship between extroverted

behaviors and loneliness, analyzing whether current classifications adequately represent the spectrum of loneliness across different age groups.

The study utilizes data from a national survey conducted in 2012, involving 623 participants aged 16 and older. Loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale, also considering demographic factors, mental health, and extroverted behaviors. The results reveal significant differences in loneliness scores based on sex, age, marital status, and employment, with mental health emerging as a strong contributor to loneliness. It is suggested that current classifications of hikikomori may not fully capture the loneliness experiences of those engaged in daily activities (Nonaka, Sakai, 2021).

In a systematic review, studies were analyzed to clarify the functioning and health of individuals with hikikomori compared to those without. Out of 8,181 studies examined, 24 were included, highlighting that individuals with hikikomori exhibit higher symptoms of depression, anxiety, and relational problems. Meta-analyses confirm that internalizing symptoms and relational difficulties are significantly greater in the hikikomori group (Yong, 2024).

In the current context, hikikomori individuals experiences their condition in the digital world, accessing alternative interaction spaces that replace direct social relationships. Online platforms thus serve as both a refuge and a stage for expressing anxieties, fears, and desires for connection, allowing the construction of new forms of sociality. Through this study, we intend to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of these experiences and relationships, focusing on a support group active on Telegram.

Methodology

This study aims to examine the daily lives of hikikomori, with particular attention to the social isolation behaviors displayed by these individuals. Collecting data through direct interactions with hikikomori individuals poses significant challenges, primarily due to their tendency towards collaborative resistance and issues related to trust (Tokuni, 2024). The complexity and the intrinsic difficulties in data collection, due to their aversion to social interaction, suggested for the adoption of a qualitative methodological approach, specifically represented by a netnography (Kozinets, 2015; 2021) applied to an Hikikomori Telegram group.

By analyzing online interactions, valuable insights regarding their perceptions, relationships, and coping strategies can be gathered, enabling a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their experiences and the challenges they face.

The chosen group was characterized by cohesion and authenticity, consisting exclusively of individuals who identify as hikikomori and who seek to adopt a similar lifestyle. The conformity to the hikikomori phenomenon facilitated reliable data collection, minimizing contamination from external members. Those who did not identify as hikikomori were excluded from the group. The limited size of the group further fostered an atmosphere of confidentiality, promoting the sincere sharing of personal reflections, opinions, and experiences.

In the field of netnography, ethical considerations regarding the observation of digital communities are an increasingly relevant topic. Such issues assume particular importance in the context of this research, requiring reflection on the ambivalent nature of online forums, regarded as both public spaces and private environments (Delli Paoli, 2022). This complexity necessitates careful consideration of informed consent practices in virtual settings.

To address these ethical concerns, researchers can adopt various strategies aimed at ensuring the integrity of their work. A crucial first step involves clear and transparent communication regarding the researcher’s presence, affiliations, and research intentions to the members of the studied community

(Delli Paoli, D'Auria, 2021). This approach helps establish a trustful relationship between the researcher and participants, facilitating more respectful and informed interactions.

The study aims to analyze the phenomenon of hikikomori in the Italian context, a phenomenon that has attracted the interest of numerous researchers (Crepaldi, 2020; Coppola, Masullo, 2021; Amendola, 2024). The exploration of this phenomenon reveals that in Italy it intertwines with specific cultural and social roots, which significantly influence its manifestations and dynamics.

In particular, it has emerged that bullying experienced during school years, especially in the high school context, represents a determining factor in the isolation journey of many young people. This traumatic experience not only contributes to a progressive social alienation but is also associated with a series of issues related to self-perception and acceptance of one's body. In fact, the relationship with body image proves to be a crucial component that fuels psychosocial distress among hikikomori youth, who often struggle to reconcile with their physical and social identity.

Began with access to a Telegram group dedicated to the hikikomori community. Entry into this virtual space was facilitated through collaboration with researchers already active in studying this phenomenon. The "lurking" phase lasted for a period of two months, during which we sought to verify whether the group was genuinely composed of individuals identifying as hikikomori. The existing literature (Coppola, Masullo, 2022) documents various situations in which hikikomori groups share their experiences; however, in the case at hand, the vibrancy of the chat is particularly noteworthy, characterized by a high volume of messages and interactions.

Subsequently, after obtaining consent from the group administrators, the authors introduced themselves to the community. At this point, a non-participant observation was conducted, during which no messages were sent in the group. This approach allowed for the collection of qualitative data on the interactive dynamics and shared experiences within the group, without influencing or altering the users' behavior. Over a six-month observation period, from May 2023 to November 2023, a corpus of approximately 90,000 messages was collected.. The excerpts of the messages shown on the following pages, in addition to being anonymized, have been translated into English by the research team for the benefit of the reader.

The topics and opinions addressed in the research accurately reflect the positions expressed by community members during the observation period. Throughout the entire observation process, the researcher did not interfere in the internal discussions of the group, thereby ensuring respect for and integrity of community interactions. The collected data were anonymized by eliminating any references that could lead back to the author.

Results

The analysis of the conversations focused on four main thematic areas: What it means to be a hikikomori, Family relationship, School and bullying, and finally, Work and university. This choice is the result of an in-depth review of the literature related to the hikikomori phenomenon.

In the first category, it emerges that the phenomenon is not limited to simple physical isolation, but rather represents a complex existential condition. Hikikomori often feel overwhelmed by social expectations and external pressures, leading them to withdraw from society. Their experience is frequently characterized by feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and sometimes depression (Saito, 2013; Crepaldi, 2020).

Regarding family dynamics, their crucial role in the lives of hikikomori is evident. Families can be both a source of support and additional stress. The literature suggests that the quality of communication within the family unit can significantly influence the individual's experience. In several cases, families

may fail to grasp the seriousness of the situation, resulting in conflicts and misunderstandings (Kato et al., 2018; Amendola, 2024).

The school context represents another central area for understanding the hikikomori phenomenon, as many of these individuals have experienced negative incidents related to bullying and academic pressure. Recent studies highlight how bullying can have a devastating impact on young people's mental health, prompting them to withdraw from the school environment (Esposito et al., 2023). Experiences of social exclusion and humiliation have been identified as contributing factors to isolation. Furthermore, the school system often does not provide adequate support to address such issues, creating a vicious cycle that perpetuates withdrawal (Crepaldi, 2020).

Finally, the area of work and university is closely connected to the growth and transition experiences of hikikomori. Many of them face the pressure to enter the workforce or complete university programs, events that can generate anxiety and fear of failure. The literature emphasizes the importance of inclusive and understanding work and academic environments that can support young people in their integration process (Crepaldi, 2020). Additionally, the lack of job opportunities and psychological support can contribute to further isolation, making reintegration into society difficult.

The qualitative analysis conducted branches out in four main directions:

1. What it means to be a hikikomori.

The prevailing conception within the group recognizes hikikomori as a non-pathological condition for which there is no definitive treatment, contrary to depression or other psychopathologies. This view closely associates hikikomori with the individual's personal life experiences, suggesting that the roots of this phenomenon lie in specific existential and relational contexts:

“User 1: It is a condition (Woman)

User 2: It is a voluntary condition for which there is no cure. It’s not depression that you can treat (Man)

User 3: It’s not necessarily voluntary (Woman)

User 2: It’s like trying to cure a hermit because they choose to abandon society to retreat and pray (Man)

User 3: Those are two completely different things (Woman)

User 2: In both cases, there is a desire to withdraw from society; only the reason and manner differ (Man)

User 1: An hikikomori doesn’t isolate themselves because they like it, usually (Woman).”

“Do you think that social isolation is a consequence of romantic failures? Because from my point of view, it is the hikikomori condition that compromises romantic life (Man).”

Voluntary isolation is characterized by the choice to distance oneself from a society perceived as oppressive. According to various authors (Teo et al., 2019; Crepaldi, 2020), the authentic hikikomori is distinguished by their constant permanence in isolation, with rare cases of those who manage to overcome this condition. The distinction between primary and secondary hikikomori, proposed by several scholars (Saito, 1998; Tajan, 2017; Esposito et al., 2023), is based on the presence or absence of pre-existing psychological disorders. Individuals considered primary hikikomori are characterized by the lack of prior diagnoses of psychopathologies, while those defined as secondary hikikomori present

such disorders in addition to voluntary isolation. For the members of the group, as of today, effective strategies or cures for their condition are not available, which is experienced as an inevitable imposition to distance themselves from a context considered harmful:

"User 1: So a true hikikomori should run away from their parents' house or live alone. Because regardless of whether you close the door, etc., you will have social interactions with your (Man).

User 2: Completely wrong. Living alone involves self-maintenance; there are no parents doing everything for you. You need to have social relationships, work to earn money, take care of household chores, do grocery shopping, etc. A person who lives alone independently cannot do it without social interactions because simply put, they cannot survive. So the true hikikomori is the one who stays at home with their family while avoiding contact as much as possible, just like with everyone else; the condition of hikikomori does not allow for self-maintenance (Woman).

User 3: Incorrect. There are more and more hikikomori who live alone and work from home while staying as isolated as possible (Man)."

The debate regarding the recognition of an individual as hikikomori is a subject of strong interest within the study group and is characterized by various divergent positions. Those who self-identify as hikikomori tend to follow the classic Japanese model proposed by Saito (1998), while also accepting forms of sociality mediated through social networks:

"Yes, when you don't have a social life, you retreat online. It's the ABC of hikikomori, but I realize there are few real ones (Man)."

However, the position held by several individuals in the group does not correspond to the classical definition of hikikomori studied in Japanese and international academic research (Teo et al., 2018; Kato et al., 2020). However, the continuous evolution of the possibilities offered by the Internet may have led to a change in the paradigm and the very conception of the syndrome. The constant use of online social networking platforms and video games seems to be a common characteristic among young hikikomori, as evidenced by the data collected for this research, which was gathered on a social media platform, specifically Telegram.

It is important to note that the picture outlined by the group members is limited to the Italian context. They distinguish between Japanese hikikomori and Italian hikikomori, even hypothesizing the possibility of a different name for the phenomenon, considering the differences observed between the two cultural realities:

"User 1: I would hardly ever leave the house if I could, and I did for a while... I have a job and live alone, but I feel like stabbing anyone who bothers me and just staying shut in here (I think this is what counts as being a "true hikikomori") (Man).

User 2: Well. I believe hikikomori don't leave for any reason at all. They shut themselves in their room, and that's it (Man).

User 1: Plus, we're not in Japan, and it should be contextualized in Italy; there are different standards and it should have a different name (Man).

User 3: The problem is that there are no beautiful girls and handsome guys behind the door here to help you go out (Man)."

2. Family Relationships

From the results obtained, it emerges that the family context plays a fundamental role in the lives of hikikomori. The paternal figure tends to be the one most subject to criticism, while regarding the maternal figure, there are divergent positions, with a significant number of participants expressing positive relationships with her.

The relationship with the family and the experiences lived within the home represent a complex theme for individuals affected by hikikomori. Studies conducted in Italy (Crepaldi, 2020; Esposito et al., 2023) outline a divergent perspective compared to that typically observed in Japan. In particular, in Italy, there is considerable difficulty in the coexistence between parents and adolescent children:

“Unfortunately, at home with the family, it always ends up in a fish fight (Man)”

“There is a family, unfortunately. They break my balls (Man)”

The family is commonly conceived as an institution characterized by complex relational dynamics, in which achieving and maintaining peace can be challenging. Indeed, tensions and conflicts within the family are sometimes considered inevitable, arising from the diversity of opinions, interests, and perspectives among its members:

“User 1: Then I just snapped, so (Man)

User 2: with whom (Man)

User 1: With those two brats who live with me (Man)”

The relationship between parents and children is often complex and characterized by a lack of mutual understanding. In many cases, parents are seen as an obstacle to the freedom and personal fulfillment of their children, creating an emotional rift. Even when living under the same roof, many hikikomori find it difficult to tolerate their presence and experience family coexistence as oppressive.

The lack of dialogue and understanding between youngs and parents can lead to feelings of resentment. Hikikomori perceive their parents as responsible for their unhappiness or, often guilty or being absent during life crucial moment. This conflict dynamic can fuel further tensions and make difficult to communicate and collaborate:

"But I mean, you've already ruined my life, so at least don't bother me because I'm not even talking to you (I'm not talking about you). To me, they are animals. Family cannot be forgiven just because it's family (Woman)."

"What kind of miserable life awaits me? I want to see how the hell I'm going to lift myself out of this poverty created by my family's stupid choices (Woman)."

"Those who are well-off have a family behind them (Man)."

Family is commonly seen as an entity that can represent an obstacle in an individual's path of growth and development. This is particularly evident in situations where personal and traumatic experiences have occurred within the family context. In particular, in contexts where young people are facing delicate and problematic situations, they may have been exposed to forms of psychological and physical violence within their family. These experiences have a profound impact on the daily lives of young people, influencing their self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Academic research has highlighted how such situations can compromise the psychological and emotional well-being of

hikikomori (Crepaldi, 2020; Watabe et al., 2022), pushing them to seek forms of emancipation and autonomy from a family context considered harmful and detrimental:

"User 1: I lived in a family with violence from the time I was born until I was 23 (Woman).

User 2: What kind of violence, if I may ask? (Man)

User 1: Physical and psychological violence. With everything that comes with it. Anyway, with my family issues, when I was 15, I started going out less because I was bullied at school and I didn't trust anyone anymore (Woman)."

In most cases, however, family misunderstandings lead to an irreparable division in which parents perceive their child as a failure and a problem, as explained very well in the following exchange:

"User 1: How does your family see you? (Man)

User 2: A parasite (Man)."

"But you definitely have a family of crazy people; that's enough, don't be too hard on yourself. I'm really stuck here for years, but in general, anyone with issues has a crazy family. Just having a slightly imperfect family leaves a mark (Man)."

3. School Experiences and Bullying

School experiences represent a significant topic within the group, although they receive less attention compared to the family context. A recurring subject of discussion revolves around the experiences of bullying encountered during the educational journey. The experience of bullying has led young individuals to withdraw into a state of isolation, initially within the school environment and later extending to the home context, thereby limiting social interactions and outings from the family environment:

“User 1: But introverted kids are targeted at school (Female)
User 2: I understand, as I mentioned I was like that too (sometimes I fall back into it) (Male)
User 1: Trying to please people who are light-years away is inappropriate (Female)”

“User 1: On the first day of school, everyone sat close together while I was isolated, they left me alone; people in the courtyard laughed at my appearance and asked me to take a photo with them to make fun of me (Female)
User 2: You need to think about yourself with positive adjectives; otherwise, you won't resolve this issue (Male)
User 3: This has happened to me too (Male)
User 4: Same here (Female)
User 5: Christ, what miserable human beings (Female)
User 3: But I didn’t care (Male)

User 6: Just being a bit shy and they treat you like a freak show (Male)”

Interaction with peers is not the only source of issues within the school environment; the relationship with teachers has also impacted the experiences of the adolescents in question. According to the hikikomori, teachers should serve as protective figures for the shyer students, defending them from bullying by their peers. However, in many instances, educators fail to adequately fulfill this role and contribute to worsening an already complex and delicate situation for numerous young individuals:

“User 1: A teacher should never mock students in any way (Male)

User 2: This is true. They shouldn't, but they do (Female)"

"Teachers are the evil. Damn them (Male)"

"In middle school, my Italian teacher bullied me." (Woman)

"Some teachers vent their frustrations on students." (Man)

"In middle school, my Italian teacher bullied me." (Man)

"User 1: Do you expect the teacher or your mom to solve the problem for you?" (Man)
"User 2: It's the usual caveman reasoning that you have to toughen up just because you're a man." (Woman)
"User 3: Bullying doesn't get solved by talking to parents or teachers. Personal experience. You either find a way to defend yourself or change classes/schools." (Man)

In most contexts, the individuals responsible for questioning the intelligence and preparation of hikikomori are primarily male classmates. Through their actions, they manage to undermine the hikikomori's confidence in their own abilities. Numerous testimonies indicate that young people begin to doubt their own capabilities due to the bullying they have experienced and the negative school experiences they have lived through:

"From that moment on, when a few days later I returned to school, they ignored me all day. Sitting alone in the last row, they acted as if I weren't there, and maybe it was better that way. I went home, embarrassed by what had happened, and thought they were jerks, but it's also true that I am below average intelligence and that I don't know, and didn't know, a damn thing." (Woman)

"User 1: I dropped out of school after failing three times in a row in the second year of high school." (Man)

"User 2: Isn't it more likely that you've convinced yourself of that due to low self-esteem?" (Woman)

"User 1: No, trust me." (Man)

"User 2: School doesn't measure intelligence." (Woman)

4. University and Work

University is perceived differently by hikikomori compared to school, primarily due to the possibility of attending classes from home, thus avoiding the obligation of in-person attendance. This opportunity seems to help mitigate the typical anxieties of the school environment, offering greater flexibility and comfort to individuals affected by this condition, where it is possible to avoid everyday problems:

"User 1: Now that you graduated, what else do you do besides drinking Monster from morning till night? I might say you've already written that 20 times, but I haven't written or read for a long time (Man)
User 2: An online university (Woman)"

"User 1: I started university to try to escape my problems, but meh (Woman)
User 2: Is it still true? (Man)
User 1: Yes (Woman)
User 3: With university, the problems triple (Man)"

The university environment is traditionally considered conducive to forming new friendships and constructively occupying one's time. A university student is often categorized within the academic context as someone who has chosen to dedicate less time to their previous peer group, while simultaneously initiating new social relationships outside an isolation sphere, such as that typically associated with the hikikomori phenomenon:

"Now they have university, imagine if they waste time here (Man)"

"For friends, university is a great place (Man)"

The classic hikikomori is characterized by a refusal not only to participate in studies, but also to integrate into the working world. Analyzing interactions within this group reveals a radically different approach compared to traditional conceptions. In this context, work is seen as a fundamental aspect for hikikomori who want to maintain a certain economic autonomy without having to interact with the outside world:

"User 1: I'm looking for a job, the point is I don't have the courage to send out my resume (Woman)
User 2: What are you ashamed of, fatty? (Man)
User 1: I don't know, it scares me (Woman)"

Job searching is commonly considered a crucial step towards achieving economic independence and the ability to live autonomously. Employment is perceived as an essential element to ensure sustenance and maintain a constant occupational routine:

"User 1: But more than anything, to do something, to keep myself occupied in some way (Man)
User 2: Yeah, I know. Working is useful to survive (Woman)"

"User 1: And now I'm working... (Woman)
User 2: I wish I had a job too (Man)
User 1: I get it; I try to hold onto this, but some days I hate it (Woman)"

"User 1: Anyway, the idea of a stable job for hikikomori is a good idea. They would at least have some economic resources to help themselves get out of this situation (Male)
User 2: Imagine giving a job to someone who is mentally unstable, taking it away from others (Female)
User 1: A remote office job is feasible even for a hikikomori... we're not idiots (Male)
User 3: The problem is mental, not economic, and who tells me that someone won't go crazy and won't work anymore? (Male)
User 2: Besides, what economic problems do you want to solve for a hikikomori? Going out with what friends? (Female)"

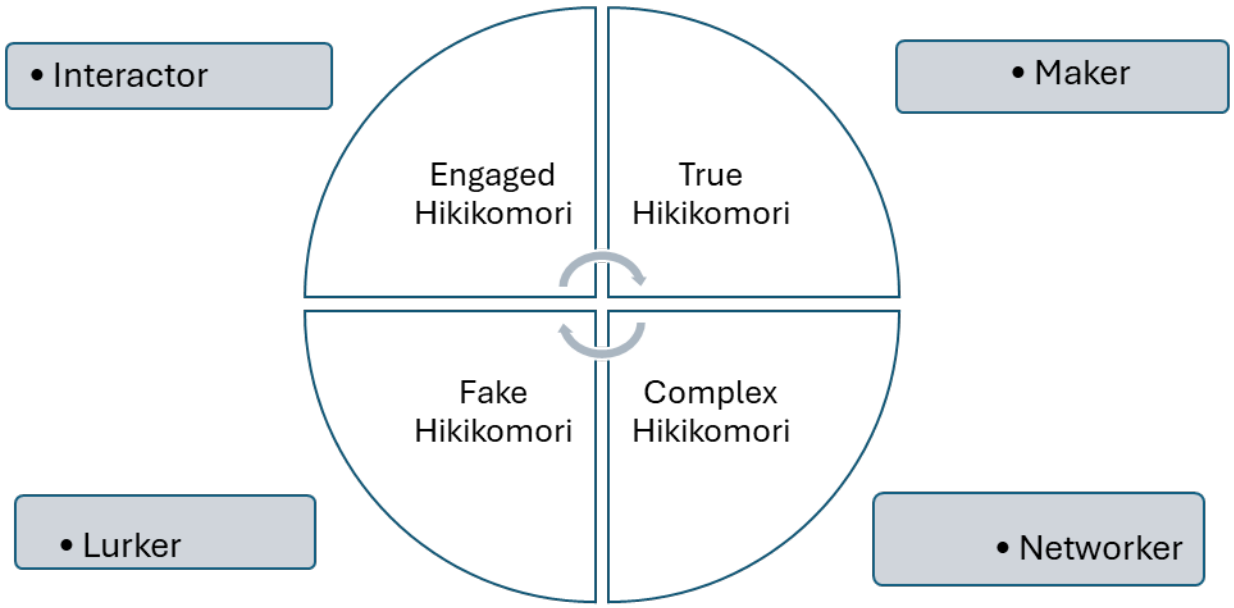
Discussion

Hikikomoris' observation has revealed significant differences in Italy and Japan. In particular, it has emerged that Italian Hikikomori exhibit a different type of relationship with their parents compared to what has been reported in studies conducted in Japan in the late 1990s. This disparity can be attributed to the structural and cultural differences between the two social contexts. In Japan, the family is characterized by a strict hierarchy, which fosters a significant emotional dependence on the mother and economic dependence on the father among Hikikomori. Conversely, in Italy, family dynamics are characterized by a different parenting style, which is reflected in the conflictual relationship that Italian Hikikomori have with their parents. Furthermore, families involved in the phenomenon of Hikikomori in Italy do not necessarily have affluent economic conditions, unlike those observed in Japan, leading to intrafamily tensions and a desire for emancipation.

Regarding peer relationships, Italian Hikikomori often lament the lack of friendships and consider themselves lonely. The search for social interactions and friendships among Italian Hikikomori primarily occurs through the use of technology; however, they feel inadequate in social and interactive terms, hindering the formation of meaningful bonds with others. In this context, participation in groups represents an initiative aimed at mitigating the sense of loneliness and social disconnection typical of Hikikomori. Establishing online relationships with individuals who share the same issues and sensitivities could constitute an alternative way to fulfill the need for socialization and belonging. This manifestation of the desire for interaction and the search for friendships within specific virtual contexts presents a new paradigm in the Hikikomori landscape, demonstrating a potential way out of the extreme isolation that characterizes them.

The importance of sociality and relationships with others in the human experience is also highlighted in the context of Hikikomori. Active participation in online groups represents a significant step toward greater openness to communication and emotional sharing, providing Hikikomori with an alternative and supportive space for socialization compared to traditional relational dynamics. The perception of Japanese Hikikomori as bright and distinct individuals in educational environments is well documented (Crepaldi, 2020; Watabe et al., 2023); however, in Italy, this premise is not always confirmed. On the contrary, cases of isolated young people who show academic difficulties or repeatedly fail exams are observed. The conflict with teachers contributes to exacerbating the sense of disdain toward the school institution, as these figures are often perceived as oppressive toward the shyer and more reserved individuals.

Following an in-depth analysis of the interactions and conversations among individuals identified as hikikomori within a dedicated group on Telegram, a typology has been developed. This typology aims to interpret the various relational and communicative dynamics that have emerged during the interactions. The different categories that have arisen from the research have allowed for the delineation of a complex framework of relational strategies adopted by hikikomori, ranging from self-isolation to a deliberate openness towards other group members.



The “True Hikikomori” represents the opinion leaders of the group and adopt the characteristic lifestyle of the classic Japanese hikikomori. These individuals do not acknowledge the possibility that hikikomori

may work or study studies through online means. They prefer to stay at home, as the classic hikikomori confines themselves within the domestic walls and demonstrates a limited capacity for self-sustainment. The relationships with their families often prove problematic, and it also leads to severing all ties with previous friendships or acquaintances. Although they actively participate in group discussions, they maintain a certain level of reserve and do not easily forge new friendships. Despite their detached attitude, they are solicited by new group members to resolve any doubts.

Those who are not considered true hikikomori are labeled as "Fake Hikikomori." These individuals exhibit a limited degree of social isolation and tend to observe rather than actively participate in the culture and dynamics of the group. Their presence is generally regarded as disruptive and unjustified by the authentic Hikikomori, who identify them as outsiders and subsequently exclude them. This exclusion manifests through their expulsion from the group, where they are considered unwelcome intruders.

“Engaged Hikikomori” are individuals who, while maintaining social isolation, choose to pursue studies or work online. Although they actively participate in the cause and community, their interactions with other members are limited due to their commitments, resulting in a certain degree of marginalization. However, compared to so-called "fake hikikomori" or those who conceal a dual identity, their level of exclusion is less severe. The dynamics of interaction with those who self-identify as true hikikomori are often conflictual, as they argue for their right to be considered hikikomori while continuing to work and earn an income. Typically, during their employment, they live alone.

“Complex Hikikomori” are individuals coming from other online communities, which distinctly differ from that of the Hikikomori. These individuals identify themselves as NEET or INCEL, in addition to being Hikikomori, and actively engage in discussions within the community, attempting to substantiate their position. They assert that a hikikomori is invariably associated with the conditions of being INCEL or NEET, depending on the case. They are not excluded from the Hikikomori community despite their diverse backgrounds, as their lifestyle aligns with the hikikomori style.

Conclusion

The adoption of netnography proved particularly effective in analyzing the phenomenon of hikikomori, given their condition of social isolation and the complex challenges they face when interacting outside their home environment (Roza et al., 2023; Kato et al., 2024). Young hikikomori tend to establish limited relationships and maintain daily routines within their households. In this context, online interactions with individuals who share similar experiences may represent a viable alternative for fulfilling their need for sociality and belonging. This phenomenon of seeking friendships in virtual settings emerges as a new paradigm among hikikomori, offering a potential pathway out of the extreme isolation that characterizes them.

This approach has proven to be particularly well-suited for studying the hikikomori phenomenon, overcoming the limitations of traditional methods such as interviews, surveys, or focus groups. These latter methods may not guarantee the same authenticity of data, as the presence of outsiders tends to contaminate interactions. Through access to online groups created by hikikomori, we have been able to collect data in a less intrusive manner, maintaining a distance that allowed for a more genuine observation of social dynamics.

It is important to highlight some limitations that emerged during our research. Initially, we acted as lurkers in the group, which means we did not actively participate in conversations. However, once our presence became known, the group members, while accepting us, showed greater hesitation about discussing certain topics. Although we did not engage in discussions, this variation in the willingness of individuals affected by hikikomori to share their experiences underscores the need for sensitive and respectful approaches in netnographic research.

In conclusion, netnography proved to be a valuable tool for exploring the complexities of hikikomori experiences. It not only provided a unique access to their social interactions but also offers significant insights into addressing the issues related to their isolation. Understanding these dynamics can help develop more effective and targeted interventions to support these young individuals on their journey toward social reintegration.

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A Netnographic Study about the Incel phenomenon in Italy

Felice Addeo[1], Valentina D'Auria[1], Vincenzo Esposito[2], Francesco Notari[1]

[1]Department of Political and Communication Science, Università degli studi di Salerno, Fisciano (Salerno), Italy. [2]2Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Roma, Italy

Abstract

The Incel phenomenon has currently become one of the most (in)famous and active online subcultures (Mountford 2018; Salojärvi et al. 2020), and it could be considered as a result of young people's increased reliance on online and digital interactions in mass culture (Standlee, 2017).

Broadly speaking, an Incel is a young man who finds it difficult to have healthy love and sexual relationships with women. Since they feel that society is characterized by an overemphasis on physical beauty and feminine superficiality, the Incels condemn it (Halpin, 2021). Such views often turn into hate speech and sexism directed at the female figure (Jaki et al., 2019).

Despite Italy's ranking as the fourth most Incel-populated country in Europe, according to the European Commission (2021), there is a lack of research on the Incel culture and its possible negative social effects (Clarke & Turner, 2020; Baele et al., 2021). We opted for netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2010) as an exploratory-descriptive method to fill this gap by investigating the dynamics of the largest Italian Incel community. The data collection process was conducted over a three-month observation period,

during which we adopted a covert access strategy and employed a lurking approach to observe interactions within the community.

Netnography helped us achieve a better and deeper understanding of the Incel phenomenon than other digital methods. By investigating Incel's ideology and system of beliefs, we found many evidence of their misogynistic perspective. The community weltanschauung relies on some key concepts: love relationships conceived as a mere sexual market, women as inherently bad person, and the justification of male oppression, violence, and oppression. A deeper linguistic analysis of the community's discourse highlights the recurrent use of dehumanizing metaphors and neologisms. Notably, we observed a high frequency of jargon terms such as 'bluepilled,' 'blackpilled,' 'normie,' and 'Stacy,' which serve to dichotomize reality and reinforce a rigid ideological framework.

A noteworthy outcome is the Incels' concern about the mothers as they believe that they undermine paternal authority and have an impact on their sons' self-esteem when they try to engage with women.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, our study also considers key ethical aspects, including researcher safety, participant consent, and harm mitigation strategies. Furthermore, we reflect on the broader societal and practical implications of our findings, particularly in relation to the intersection between Incel ideology and mental health concerns such as self-esteem, depression, and perceived social isolation. These elements contribute to shaping their worldview and reinforce their resentment toward society.

Session 12: Greening the feed: sustainability and communication

Tweeting Greenfluencing: Greta Thunberg's Digital Activism and Ethics of Shared Responsibility

André Luiz de Souza-Leão, Ana Carolina Sampaio, Grayci Kelli Patrocínio

Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil

Abstract

Social media platforms have facilitated the rise of digital influencers while increasingly serving as arenas for political and cultural engagement. Within this context, activist digital influencers have emerged. In the realm of socio-environmental activism, Greta Thunberg stands out as one of the most recognized and followed greenfluencers globally, leveraging Twitter as a pivotal platform to articulate discursive practices in support of climate activism. Thunberg's activism involves direct engagement with political leaders, corporate actors, and grassroots movements, amplifying socio-environmental issues on a global scale, making her a key figure for examining how activist influencers contest dominant market ideologies in digital environments. Based on this, the present study is guided by the following research question: How does Greta Thunberg appropriate Twitter to articulate discursive practices in support of socio-environmental activism? To ground this study, Posthuman Theory was adopted, challenging anthropocentrism by emphasizing the interconnections among humans, digital technologies, and ecological systems. This theoretical framework positions activism as a hybrid phenomenon, where resistance emerges through relational agencies among human actors, algorithms, and environmental data, co-constructing discursive strategies that contest dominant market ideologies. The study employed netnography, analyzing a corpus composed of two types of data: (1) investigative data,

comprising 229 Twitter posts published between July 2023 and June 2024, and (2) immersive data, collected through weekly journals over six months (February to August 2024). The findings revealed six descriptive categories of discursive practices: mobilization, encouraging collective engagement in protests and activism; denunciation, exposing those responsible for socio-environmental crises; awareness, promoting critical consciousness about environmental issues; advocacy, demanding structural changes toward socio-environmental equity; celebration, recognizing activist progress and political victories; and performativity, integrating creative and investigative narratives with activist technologies and aesthetics. The discursive practices employed by Greta on Twitter transcend traditional communication, forming hybrid networks that connect humans, digital platforms, and environmental elements. These networks contest market ideologies that perpetuate environmental crises by employing discursive strategies to expose greenwashing and the inadequacies of global public policies. Through the strategic use of hashtags, graphics, images, and both rational and emotional narratives, Greta adopts a posthuman corporeality, reconfiguring consumption as a political act and linking digital activism to global mobilizations. By fostering relational agencies among digital and ecological actors, her practices promote an ethic of shared responsibility, demonstrating how social media can serve as hybrid spaces where market practices are challenged. Situated within a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) framework with a critical lens, the research explores the intersection of influencer marketing and sustainability communication to address the theoretical gap concerning how activist influencers actively contest environmental capitalism and reconfigure digital spaces for socio-environmental resistance, integrating a posthuman perspective. Thus, this study contributes to the field by showing how greenfluencers utilize digital technologies to contest hegemonic discourses associated with sustainable capitalism. Furthermore, it illustrates how digital discursive practices mobilize consumers as agents of social change. Finally, it advances the adoption of Posthuman Theory as an innovative framework for understanding digital discursive practices, emphasizing the integration of humans, technologies, and ecosystems in contexts related to consumer culture.

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Investigating how social media can be used as a tool of influence that impacts consumer behaviour in adopting more sustainable fashion consumption choices

Cymbreley Wong

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Abstract

There is increasing pressure to turn towards a more sustainable approach to fashion, highlighted by the plethora of research that suggests the current methods of fashion production and consumption have negative impacts on the environment. This is a well-studied field; however, the realm of sustainable fashion and its outreach are ever-changing. A key driver to adapting to more sustainable fashion consumption behaviours is the increasing use of social media and the role of influencers have in our daily lives. Social media allows for interactions that can occur between influencer and their followers, and both can choose how much they wish to share or engage with each other, thus creating trust and credibility. Whilst this relationship has been studied, further research is necessary to investigate how influencers influence by sharing content through different messaging strategies; so as a result of this, it could impact their followers in being more conscious about their fashion choices. This research seeks at how social media influencers within the fashion and sustainable fashion community on Instagram. A netnographic approach is applied to collect data and this is done by analysing fifteen Instagram accounts of influencers who: promote their fashion lifestyle (fashion influencers); promote the use of circular fashion business models i.e. second-hand clothing, rental, tailoring (sustainable fashion influencers); and advocate for change with the fashion industry (sustainable fashion activists). Instagram is chosen because there are over two billion monthly users (META, 2024) and is the most popular platform influencers in this community choose to use. Purposive sampling techniques are used to select influencers i.e. through "hashtags", number of followers and account descriptions that focus on fashion and sustainable fashion. The research highlights how influencers choose to share this opinion through types of messaging strategies such as storytelling, outfit reels, role playing and personal experiences either posted as picture or video content. As well as this the researcher actively follows the chosen influencers to observe and immerse in this community. The creative submission provided is a snapshot of the influencers studied in this research. To theorise how influencers in the fashion and sustainable fashion community influence, diffusion of innovation theory is adopted to identify how a variety of messaging strategies are used and have evolved within this community and for influencers themselves. This a depicted as storytelling and is further categorised into genres of influence. As well as this the research unveils the spread of messaging strategy feedback loops, that are consistently connecting influencers together and with their followers too. Whilst this research does not dictate whether there will be behavioural change to more sustainable fashion consumption choices, it does

seek out the strategies employed by influencers that could drive the adoption of more sustainable behaviours. These findings contribute to the practical and theoretical development of influencer marketing, by emphasising spread of differing messaging strategies that can enable the adoption of more sustainable fashion choices.

Keywords: social media influencers, sustainable consumption, messaging strategies, storytelling, diffusion theory

Creating a Plastic Revolution: A netnographic study of the global plastics treaty

Matthew Anderson

University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, United Kingdom

Abstract

Introduction

This study focuses on the recent, and ongoing, negotiations around the Global Plastics Treaty. The aim of the treaty is to provide a comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastic, including its production, design, and disposal (UNEP, 2024). Building on recent work by the Revolution Plastics Institute (Fletcher, 2024) this paper sets out to analyse the role of online communities in supporting and sustaining the ambitions of a comprehensive and legally binding global plastics treaty. In particular, we are interested in how arts-based campaigns and provocations have started conversations both online and offline and informed policy dialogues around the use and misuse of plastics.

Research Context and Approach

In March 2022, nearly 200 nations endorsed a historic resolution to develop a new global and legally binding agreement or treaty by the end of 2024 (March et al., 2024). Five intergovernmental negotiating meetings (INCs) have been held between November 2022 and December 2024 (see Figure 1). The treaty text is yet to be agreed, with further rounds of meetings planned for 2025 (INC-5.2).

We use netnography to trace the development and evolution of a diverse online community, including campaigners, NGOs and negotiators that are supporting the objectives of the High Ambition Coalition. Led by the official delegations from Rwanda and Norway, the High Ambition Coalition has outlined three strategic goals: 1) Restrain plastic consumption and production to sustainable levels; 2) Enable a circular economy for plastics that protects the environment and human health; 3) Achieve environmentally sound management and recycling of plastic waste (HAC, 2022).

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does arts-based activism engage with the Global Plastics Treaty?

2. How have digital spaces been used to support the high-ambition coalition?

3. What is the potential application and limitations for digital arts-based activism as a driver for change?

Findings and Contribution

There is growing interest in netnography as an approach to investigate public engagement on environmental and sustainability topics including climate change awareness and denialism (Dametto & Bonet-Marti, 2024), consumer motivations (Beccanulli & Biraghi, 2024) and the role of bloggers and influencers (Fanini et al., 2021). Our study was inspired by community engagement programmes that have used creative arts-based methods and online platforms to highlight the issue of plastic pollution. (See the image attached of Jitu la Taka, 'Plastic Monster', created by the Mukuru Youth Initiative in Nairobi, Kenya).

We are interested in the role of artistic activism, or 'artivism', (Rodríguez-Labajos, 2022) as a potential driver for policy and regulatory change. Our initial findings highlight the potential of arts-based approaches to encourage people to think creatively, building solutions that can help disrupt power structures (Bowyer et al., 2024). We see opportunities for digital arts-based activism to identify 'cracks in the system' that can be used to reverse the accumulative effects of power over, and to strengthen the possibilities of power to (Gaventa, 2021).

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Eco-friendly weddings: Practices, aesthetics, and values

Marie Kerekes[1], Saoussan Ben Douissa[2]

[1]Independent Researcher, Paris, France. [2]Université Paris Dauphine - PSL, Paris, France

Abstract

The growing awareness of environmental issues has amplified interest in sustainable practices across cultural rituals, including weddings. Prior research has emphasized the role of pro-environmental behaviors in supporting social and ecological responsibility (Deale & Lee, 2024) and the integration of sustainable principles into event planning and consumer behavior (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010). Additionally, the socio-cultural dimensions of alternative celebrations have been explored as a space for challenging traditional norms (Kwon, 2017), while recent studies highlight the potential of sustainable events to bridge community and ecological concerns (Toscani et al., 2024).

Building on this foundation, the present study investigates how individuals and communities engage and promote eco-friendly practices in weddings, and seeks to answer the following question: how individuals and communities engage and promote sustainable practices in the context of eco-friendly weddings?

Using the netnographic methodology of Kozinets (2020), this research analyzed digital interactions on eco-wedding-focused platforms, including Facebook groups (e.g., “Vinted Spécial Mariage” and “Little Mariage”), Instagram hashtags (e.g., #mariageecolo, #mariageecologique), as well as blogs, webpages and webzines comments sections (such as “Madmoizelle”). The dataset comprised posts, comments, and multimedia content contributed by individuals who had hosted eco-friendly weddings or aspired to do so. These interactions allow online communities to be inspired and share ideas, advice and tutorials, while providing insights into what motivates and influences them to adopt sustainable wedding practices.

The analysis identified three distinct levels of eco-friendliness in wedding practices. The first, aesthetic eco-friendliness, emphasizes nature-inspired elements, abundant flowers, and non-traditional values to create an “enchanted” atmosphere. The second, pragmatic eco-friendliness, is characterized by ‘‘Do It Yourself’’ (DIY) elements, vegetarian or vegan menus, minimalism driven by mental or financial simplicity, and collective organization. The third, deeply ecological eco-friendliness, prioritizes zero-waste principles, ecological minimalism, and the allocation of resources toward environmental needs, where aesthetics take a secondary role.

This research highlights the interplay between aesthetic aspirations and ecological imperatives, reflecting broader negotiations between personal values, societal norms, and environmental responsibilities. By framing eco-friendly weddings as a site of sustainability discourse, the study provides insights into how traditional practices evolve under environmental pressures. Furthermore, it underscores the role of digital communities as incubators for ecological minimalism, collective awareness about reuse and recycling (giving items a second life), and the normalization of sustainable practices.

Keywords: Netnography, Eco-Friendly Weddings, Sustainability, Events, Green Economy

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Session 13: Social media subcultures

TikTok and the Platformization of Commerce from below: Dynamics of Economic Sustainability Among “Popular” Families in Southern Italy

Sabrina Bellafronte

University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

Abstract

My contribution explores how the platformisation of trade on TikTok is redefining sales practices, consumption and economic sustainability in the context of ‘working-class’ households in Southern Italy, with a specific focus on Naples and its province. The study explores the new frontiers of trade on TikTok, a platform that emerges as a key instrument of economic sustainability for working-class families living in situations of precariousness and hardship. TikTok re-evaluates the home as a work space and live as an arena for the reproduction of popular culture and informal economies. The study explores the phenomenon through a socio-technical perspective, analysing the ways in which the art of making do (Pine, 2016) manifests itself in digital contexts, enhancing popular creativity and local imagery. This city has always had the ability to impose itself in the collective imagination, acquiring on a cultural level ‘a sudden hegemony’. This article contributes significantly to netnography by examining the intersection of technology, home economics and popular culture, with a focus on the socio-spatial dynamics of local economic deprivation (Gago, 2017). The mixed method design (Amaturo & Punziano, 2016) integrates cartographic spatial analysis, netnography of economic practices on TikTok and traditional qualitative techniques such as participant observation and in-depth discursive interviews. The choice to use netnography stems from the need to understand and address the challenges of an interactive and dynamic context such as live shopping, an unprecedented environment that therefore requires an innovative methodological approach. Preliminary literature analysis has shown that netnography is an essential tool for exploring the social, economic and cultural dynamics emerging in a digital scenario characterised by ephemerality and strong interactive community participation. My research intends to distinguish itself through its creative approach: I intend to present my findings through an immersive narrative, integrating visual and performative analyses inspired by the live TikToks themselves, transforming my presentation into an experience that reflects the dynamics examined and takes into account linguistic and cultural peculiarities. It is hoped through the application of netnography to refine the future ability to access key information and ensure a more in-depth observation of the field, in order to grasp the various nuances of this extremely novel and elusive phenomenon by offering a rich and multi-perspective view.

Keywords: Live shopping, TikTok, platformization of commerce, netnography, economic sustainability of households.

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Creating the vibe around beer on social media – the case of Beergeeks group in the Netherlands (and beyond)

Jan Lichota[1], Ferry Wijnhoven[2]

[1]UNED, Madrid, Spain. [2]Beer Geeks NL, Arnhem, Netherlands

Abstract

The facility of creating interest driven groups on social media has allowed to develop multigenerational communities centered around one or more specific interests or products. In recent years, the term "BeerGeek" has emerged as a significant cultural and social label within the beer consumers community. While the phenomenon might be emblematic of a broader shift towards "small is beautiful", within in the "craft beer" community it has allowed to go beyond a niche and move towards exchange and beer literacy among beer drinkers.

BeerGeeks are individuals who demonstrate a deep enthusiasm for beer, often focusing on its diverse styles, production methods, and tasting experiences. These enthusiasts engage in beer consumption not merely as a casual activity but as a profound exploration of the artistry behind brewing, incorporating knowledge of ingredients, brewing techniques, and beer history into their identity. Socially, BeerGeeks form tight-knit communities that facilitate shared experiences, discussions, and knowledge exchange.

Formed in October 2013 on Facebook in the Netherlands, the BeerGeeks group gathers today (end 2024) over 17.7 thousand members. Over time the group has expanded beyond a local community, and thanks to the continuous exchange of views it managed to create specific events and forms of expression among its members.

The group is made of people who are enthusiastic about beer. Nonetheless, it isn't about publishing the most exclusive whales (extremely uncommon, unique beers), but rather about uploading beers people are currently enjoying or anything else they want to say about a beer. With the limit of not allowing selling beer and professional dealing, everything is acceptable in this community as long as it has something to do with beer. There are no true restrictions, however members are requested to not upload unlawful content, to not spam, keep publicity to a minimal, and to not bash or trash.

Beer-related information, focusing on reviews, jokes, visits and debates beyond new releases, is an important feature of the network, and users frequently create social bonds based on shared preferences, beer discoveries, and common interests. These interactions also help to democratise beer culture, making expertise accessible to a broader audience rather than just professional brewers and commentators.

The research paper explores the BeerGeeks group evolution in its numbers, the form of expression around beer and the creativity of its members in delivering messages on selected beers and activities

shared within the group. It also shows the evolution beyond social media and the interaction of members at events and other initiatives, and how the platform allowed to reach those forms of interaction.

Through the evolution of interest, knowledge, social engagement, and commitment to discover the variety existing in beer and all its surrounding environment, BeerGeeks have transformed beer consumption into a dense and culturally significant activity. Their impact extends beyond simple consumption and dives into new forms of creativity.

Purnam to Personas: A Netnographic Approach to Enhancing Equitable Education for International Postgraduate Students from the Global South

Alex Fenton, Athalia Dangerfield, Vina Mistry, Trevor Omoruyi

University of Chester, Chester, United Kingdom

Abstract

The concept of Purnam is an ancient Indian concept which is about achieving balance and fulfilment in life (Chatterjee, 2022) and education is a key part of achieving fulfilment. International student mobility is a growing and prominent feature of the global educational landscape. This also reflects the growth of developing nations like India, China and Nigeria and a geopolitical shift from the global North to the South. Universities are often using internal surveys to understand their students. This neglects more creative, naturalistic approaches to understanding international students.

We adopted a team netnography approach to understand the concept of Purnam for international students. We created an immersion journal in a secure shared document over 8 months which the team contributed to and met regularly to discuss findings. Our study focussed primarly on posts by international students on LinkedIn.

This paper aims to address significant gaps in the literature related to equitable education for international students, particularly from the global South. While much research focuses on students from the global North, there remains a lack of studies on the challenges faced by students from emerging markets. Previous work, such as Ainscow (2019) focussed on younger learners, our study extends this to adult learners primarily in postgraduate taught education. By focusing on the importance of Purnam, we highlight the need for educational institutions to ensure that international students have access to resources and support tailored to their unique needs.

The concept of Purnam emphasises reflection on lived experiences. The findings of this study suggest that creating an environment that fosters collaboration, cross-cultural understanding, and reflection is essential for achieving Purnam for international students. This involves addressing challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the adjustment to a new educational system, all of which can impact students' sense of belonging and fulfilment.

This paper argues that equitable education is a critical component of achieving Purnam for international students and ensuring that their needs are met which can significantly improve their academic experiences and outcomes. By adopting more creative and naturalistic ways of understanding international students through qualitative data and netnography, Universities can better understand cultural sensitivity and personal and professional growth of international students.

We argue for increased use and understanding of netnography to combine with other forms of data to create international student personas. Personas have long been used by marketing department to

understand audiences. Balancing pain and trust points in personas is key to the balance and the concept of Purnam is fundamental to this. We propose the use of netnography to support the creation and refinement of international student personas which take into account Purnam to achieve balance.

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Session 14: Inclusion in motion

Flying with wheels: A longitudinal netnographic study of creative solutions for accessible air travel.

Elizabeth Aduhene

Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, United Kingdom

Abstract

Accessible air travel remains an aspirational goal, despite significant growth in the accessible tourism market (UNWTO, 2024). Airlines continue to face sharp criticism for failing to meet the requirements of wheelchair-using passengers, an issue exacerbated by discriminatory practices, inhumane treatment, and outdated perceptions of disability (Evans, Colls, & Bias, 2024). While accessible tourism has been a focus of evolving theoretical discourse (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020), the practical realisation of fully accessible air travel remains unfulfilled.

This research combines immersive netnographic observation conducted over six years (2018-2024) with targeted data collection phases. The study employed three netnographical data collection approaches: 1) investigative systematic mining of Twitter/X conversations over five weeks in July-August 2019, yielding 621 relevant tweets, 2) immersive unobtrusive collection of 393 tweets and associated thread discussions, and 3) interactive semi-structured interviews with 22 members of the wheelchair-using community conducted in two phases (August-December 2019 and June-July 2021). This multi-method approach went beyond documenting barriers of air travel and sharing lived experiences, revealing wheelchair-using passengers as a creative consumer community.

The evolution of disabled people from being viewed as ‘vulnerable consumers’ (Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg, 2005) to ‘innovative muses’ (Donovan, 2020) has highlighted their potential to drive innovation that benefits both their community and broader society (Mailloux and Ludke, 2024). Social media platforms have enabled collaborative practices that foster creativity and innovation revealing wheelchair-using passengers as innovative-orientated online consumers. The longitudinal immersion analysis demonstrates how this community engages in collective innovation through collaborative knowledge sharing and seeking, problem-solving and solution development. Using Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau's (2008) typology, the wheelchair-using community can be identified as a ‘crowd’ working towards a specific goal of accessible airline services. More broadly, the pursuit of accessible air travel contributes not only to the completion of the concept of Accessible Tourism but also to the Transformative Service Research agenda aiming to enhance consumer lives and experiences (Rosenbaum *et al.* 2020).

The findings highlight the barriers to air travel and their impact, through experiential narratives, while also revealing how the community leverages digital platforms to transform individual experiences into collective innovative resources. These digital traces create a repository of user-generated solutions that challenge current service limitations, showcase best practices, and reimage disability and universal design approaches. The analysis reveals an evolving wheelchair-using consumer whose expertise and innovation benefit both the airline industry and the broader wheelchair-using community through advice and advocacy. This community’s creativity results in collective consumer innovations that improve airline services not only for wheelchair users but for all passengers.

This research advances understanding of creative consumer communities and transformational service research, highlighting how accessible air travel would enhance the wellbeing of wheelchair-using passengers, their companions and the broader travelling public. By identifying the wheelchair-using

community as legitimate consumers of airline services, the research emphasises their value as an innovation-orientated online consumer community offering actionable insights for service innovation. The study demonstrates how netnographic methods can amplify marginalised consumer voices, transforming communities typically viewed as "*problems to be solved*" into recognised collaborators in innovation.

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Calm Amidst Chaos: Navigating Air Travel for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum

Giacomo Bagna[1], Giada Mattias[1], Francesca Avallone[2], Anna Satta[3]

[1]University of Torino, Torino, Italy. [2]University of Sannio, Benevento, Italy. [3]University of Sassari, Sassari, Italy

Abstract

Our study investigates the challenges faced by individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) during air travel, emphasizing the need for inclusive service strategies within the airline industry (Sedgley et al., 2017; Song & Park, 2023). Utilizing a netnographic approach, as outlined by Kozinets and Gretzel (2024), the research analyzed data from Skytrax reviews and social media platforms to explore the lived experiences of ASD passengers. Netnography, which adapts ethnographic methods to online contexts, enabled the study to capture rich, naturally occurring data from digital communities, providing insights into the sensory, emotional, and social challenges faced by ASD travelers. Thematic analysis identified five key areas of concern: accessibility, sensory sensitivity, communication, emotional management, and social stigmatization.

Findings reveal that sensory overload—caused by loud announcements, bright lighting, and crowded spaces—remains a significant barrier for ASD travelers (Edwards et al., 2024). Communication issues, such as inconsistent information and insufficiently trained staff, further exacerbate stress. Social stigmatization during meltdowns or when requesting assistance highlights the need for greater public awareness and empathy.

The study recommends incorporating multi-sensory design elements such as dimmed lighting, calming scents, and noise reduction technologies to address these challenges. Enhanced communication strategies are also proposed, including dedicated support channels and pre-travel digital platforms for special needs declarations. These measures not only improve the travel experience for ASD passengers but also strengthen customer loyalty and enhance the brand reputation of airlines.

The research contributes to Transformative Service Research (TSR) by advocating for service designs prioritizing consumer well-being and inclusivity. It underscores how empathetic service environments can accommodate neurodiverse needs while offering strategic benefits to airlines. Future studies should explore the longitudinal impacts of these interventions and expand their scope to other transportation sectors to promote a more equitable travel ecosystem.

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Mapping the Terra Incognita: Archetypes and Intertextuality in Ageing Narratives

Samuel Copland[1], Michael Mulvey[2], Kelly Marnfeldt[3], Valentina Primossi[2]

[1]University of Gloucestershire, Gloucester, United Kingdom. [2]Telfer School of Management, Ottawa, Canada. [3]University of Southern California, Stanford, USA

Abstract

This research refines netnographic methodology by mapping and interpreting online narratives, incorporating AI-driven analysis to uncover the interplay of archetypes, intertextuality, and meta-narratives. This approach offers a more structured and comprehensive framework for understanding online conversations. We conceptualise online communities as narrative landscapes in which a nuanced understanding of storytelling and cultural references is essential for effective navigation.

To examine these dynamics, we conducted a netnographic study of hopeful perspectives on ageing within the subreddit r/Futurology, a community devoted to Future(s) Studies and evidence-based speculation about humanity's technology, and civilizational development. These conversations provide a fertile space to examine the interplay between archetypes, intertextual narratives, and broader social discourses on ageing. Building on the work of Kozinets & Gretzel (2024), we integrated AI-driven

analysis to systematically map the narrative landscape (Lee & Martin, 2015), complementing it with qualitative immersion to gain an in-depth understanding of individual stories and perspectives.

When conducting netnography, researchers navigate the network of intertextual references embedded within online communities. These narratives often transcend time and culture, weaving multi-dimensional stories that require a nuanced hermeneutic approach. Our research refines netnographic methodology through systemic mapping and interpretation of online narratives, focusing on the theme of ageing.

We argue that decoding how character archetypes drive tension and shape narrative trajectories is essential to understanding this dynamic storytelling ecosystem. Social media generates meta-narratives around critical themes, providing a distinctive lens into collective anxieties, aspirations, and societal transformations. This underscores the significance of narrative construction and interpretation in the digital age.

Using a seven-stage process (see Table 1), we charted the diverse perspectives and tensions shaping discussions on ageing within the r/Futurology subreddit. By identifying six distinct character archetypes (*protagonists, antagonists, liminal protagonists, witnesses, helpers, and opponents)* and analyzing their interactions, we uncovered the underlying values, beliefs, and anxieties driving the discourse on ageing. These archetypes engage in dynamic dialogues, drawing on diverse cultural references and allegorical frameworks to construct competing narratives.

This refined netnographic approach offers a valuable tool for researchers seeking to understand complex online conversations and the interplay of individual and collective narratives. It challenges assumptions about ageing while fostering a deeper understanding of the interplay between individual agency and collective storytelling in online communities (Page, 2018). Our work also underscores the importance of revisiting classic storytelling theories within the context of social media platforms (Hirschman, 2000; Stern, 1990) and their continued relevance in the co-creation of meaning within online communities.

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Keywords: *AI-driven analysis, character archetypes, narrative mapping, storytelling*

Session 15: Popularizing, idealizing and compartmentalizing

Compartmentalising Identity: A qualitative multiplatform study into how social media affordances shape consumers' perceptions of privacy on social media.

Magdalena Marchowska-Raza[1], Tala Almaghrabi[2]

[1]University of Salford, Manchester, United Kingdom. [2]Brunel University of London, London, United Kingdom

Abstract

As the boundaries between reality and social media continue to blur, social interaction increasingly involves a seamless interchange between the digital and physical worlds. With this shift, concerns about users' privacy have become more pronounced, drawing significant attention from scholars and practitioners (Sarikakis and Winter, 2017; Saura et al., 2023). However, there is limited research on the role of specific platforms and their unique affordances (Trepte, 2021) in shaping users' perceptions of privacy and, consequently, their online behaviour and emotional wellbeing.

Previous studies have examined how users interpret textual aspects of privacy, such as terms and conditions, and how they navigate anonymity by presenting different aspects of their identities in various online spaces (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). They do so by adopting "masks" and modifying their behaviour based on anticipated audiences, often to achieve a sense of security, trust, and intimacy. Building on Goffman's (1969) theory of self-presentation and the concept of compartmentalisation, this study seeks to explore how consumers negotiate and reframe their understanding of privacy online and how this process varies across different social media platforms. Specifically, it focuses on how users navigate and manage tensions to balance privacy and anonymity, safeguarding personal boundaries while fostering emotional resilience in various social media environments.

The study consists of two phases. The first involves a netnographic *immersion* and *investigation* of the top 14 social networking sites in the UK. This exploration centres on the platforms' affordances—anonymity, editability, association, and persistence—to evaluate the levels of user privacy on the selected platforms, with an aim of developing a framework of anonymity. The second phase involves *interaction* with users via interviews, guided by the framework of anonymity, exploring how platform-specific affordances influence users' perceptions of privacy and their subsequent behaviours. Interviews examine how users compartmentalise social media presence, separating aspects of their identity and privacy across different platforms to manage boundaries and expectations.

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on social media and privacy by presenting a framework of anonymity that broadens our understanding of how platform affordances shape users' privacy experiences and behaviours. As such, the study aims to empower social media users to navigate privacy challenges, inform platform design and policy recommendations, and support organisations and charities working to protect online privacy and digital well-being.

Keywords: *social media, online privacy, compartmentalisation, social media affordances, netnography*.

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The Mafiosphere: An Empirical Netnographic Investigation of Criminal Narratives Through TikTok

Marcello Ravveduto, Francesco Notari

University of Salerno, Salerno, Italy

Abstract

Background: The transformation of social media platforms' ecosystem has redefined how criminal phenomena are represented and understood (Castells & Cardoso, 2022). While previous studies have explored organized crime manifestations on traditional social media (Varese et al., 2021), TikTok emerges as a distinctive digital space where mafia narratives take on unprecedented forms (Ravveduto, 2023). This platform's uniqueness lies in its ability to generate new forms of digital storytelling through brief and highly viral formats. This investigation is particularly timely as TikTok's algorithmic characteristics and content format requirements create unique conditions for the transformation of cultural narratives, distinct from those observed in traditional social media platforms.

Objective: Drawing on cultural mediation theory (Silverstone, 2020) and digital cultural translation (Lee and Wang, 2023), this study employs a netnographic approach to analyze representations of criminal organizations on TikTok. While cultural mediation theory has traditionally focused on mainstream media channels, this research extends its application to emerging digital platforms, offering new insights into how criminal cultural codes adapt and evolve within algorithm-driven, short-form content environments. The aim is to understand how mafia cultural codes are reinterpreted through the platform's languages, acquiring new meanings that go beyond traditional cultural mediation, with particular attention to the visual, sonic, and textual elements that characterize the TikTok format.

Methodology: The research adopts a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2020) through non-participant observation over 6 months (June 1, 2024 - December 31, 2024), following rigorous ethical guidelines for handling sensitive content. The empirical material analysis is based on systematic content mapping through social network analysis (Di Nicola & Sergi, 2023), integrated with in-depth qualitative digital discourse analysis (Romano & Chen, 2023). Special attention has been paid to multimodal content analysis, considering the interaction between visual, sonic, and textual elements. Ethical considerations have been carefully addressed through a robust framework for managing sensitive content, including protocols for handling potential illegal content disclosure and maintaining researcher safety during digital fieldwork. Data collection adhered to platform terms of service while ensuring research integrity.

Results and Discussion: Preliminary results highlight the emergence of three main forms of mafia phenomenon narration: (1) the aesthetic re-elaboration of traditional codes through memes and musical trends, (2) the construction of "entertainment-oriented" narratives that reconfigure the figures of "actors"

and "audience," and (3) the formation of digital tribes where the identity elements of mafia narrative are redefined. The identified expressive codes include the use of traditional visual symbols reworked in a digital key, specific musical references, and narrative modes that merge elements of criminal culture with typical TikTok formats.

Implications: Beyond the specific context of mafia narratives, this research provides valuable insights for understanding how traditional cultural codes are transformed through digital platform affordances. The methodological framework developed here can be applied to study various forms of cultural translation in digital environments, contributing to both theoretical advancement and practical applications in digital cultural studies. The findings have significant implications for understanding cultural diffusion dynamics in the digital era and for developing platform-mediated social intervention strategies.

Virtual Republics: Charting the Ideologies of Network States

Mariam Humayun

Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

Abstract

From communing off the coast of Malaysia for a Network School to living in El Zonte's Bitcoin Beach, the emergence of "network states" marks a transformative shift in how humans organize, govern, and imagine their futures. Defined by the intersection of decentralized technologies, such cryptocurrencies and smart contracts, with community-driven governance, network states represent a novel experiment in social organization. These digital-first, borderless societies are often anchored by ideals of autonomy, efficiency, and innovation, blending libertarian and technocratic visions of progress. This paper explores the techtopian ideologies underpinning these network states, unpacking the aspirations, contradictions, and challenges inherent in their development.

At the heart of network states is a technological utopianism that sees digital tools as a pathway to liberating humanity from the inefficiencies and constraints of traditional nation-states (Kozinets 2008). These communities aim to bypass bureaucratic red tape and offer alternative frameworks for governance, often using decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) to manage collective decisions. This ethos reflects a belief in the power of technology to not only disrupt but fundamentally reimagine societal structures. From crypto-jungles in Costa Rica to experimental zones like Prospera in Honduras, network states attempt to build scalable, self-sufficient ecosystems powered by blockchain and fueled by global mobility.

The ideological foundation of these experiments often draws on narratives of individual freedom and collective prosperity. Influenced by Silicon Valley's techno-libertarian ethos (Turner 2006), these projects envision societies that prioritize meritocratic innovation, unbounded entrepreneurialism, and the dissolution of geographic and political constraints. Network states position themselves as alternatives to what they see as the stagnation of legacy institutions, offering instead a vision of efficient governance optimized for a digital age. Communities like Zuzalu emphasize health and longevity, while seasteading initiatives imagine floating cities as havens for freedom-seekers. These ventures evoke the ideals of self-determination and boundless potential but are also criticized for their reliance on exclusivity and elite participation.

To better understand the lived realities of network states, this study employs a netnographic approach complemented by ethnographic interviews. By engaging directly with participants in these DAO

communities (Cabin, Zuzalu, Network School, and Edge) —through Discord, X, reddit, YouTube, and in-person interactions —this research seeks to uncover the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of those driving these experiments. Netnography enables a deeper exploration of the online discourse, governance practices, and collective identity formation, while ethnographic interviews provide rich, qualitative insights into participants' personal experiences and worldviews. This dual approach offers a holistic view of the tensions and synergies between ideology and practice in network states.

Ultimately, network states exemplify the broader tensions between innovation and tradition, autonomy and interdependence, and utopian aspirations versus practical realities. By exploring the ideologies driving these initiatives and critically assessing their outcomes through immersive fieldwork, we can better understand the implications of these experiments for the future of governance, society, and human flourishing in the digital age. This study invites a nuanced dialogue about the possibilities and limitations of a techtopian world, where the promises of decentralization are matched with the complexities of collective existence.

Session 16: Influencer culture and fashion

Imaginative Interventions: A New Materialist Perspective on the Ethics of Influencer Marketing

Rachel Ashman[1], Katie Thompson[2], Anthony Patterson[3]

[1]University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom. [2]Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom. [3]Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

Abstract

What if we reimagined digital ethics not as a set of rules, but as an interplay between human creativity and technological agency? This research challenges conventional management approaches by exploring how selfie-editing technologies and human actors co-create ethical realities in influencer marketing – an industry worth $39.09bn (Statista, 2024).

Through a new materialist lens (Barad, 2007) and using a netnography including interviews where we watched influencers edit their selfies in real time, we explore territories where human imagination meets technological capability. We examine how self-editing technologies actively shape the creative and ethical choices of influencers (Böhm et al., 2022). Drawing on Barad's concept of agential realism, our research reveals how an ethical code of conduct emerges through the imaginative interplay of human and non-human actors (Lavrence and Cambre, 2020).

Our empirical investigation develops the concept of 'visual misinformation' to capture these complex interactions. We find that influencers operate neither as fully autonomous agents nor as technological subordinates, but as creative participants in an evolving digital ecology. This understanding challenges us to imagine new ways of conceptualizing responsibility in digital spaces.

The findings suggest that ethical accountability in digital contexts emerges through an interplay of human imagination, technological affordances, and platform dynamics. By mapping these relationships, we offer fresh perspectives on how ethical practices emerge and evolve in digital environments. This approach opens new possibilities for understanding responsibility in an age where the boundaries between human creativity and technological agency increasingly blur.

This research offers both theoretical insights and imaginative possibilities. We demonstrate how a new materialist informed netnography can help us envision different ways of understanding digital ethics. These insights are valuable in demonstrating how influencers navigate the creative and ethical challenges of emerging technologies, suggesting new ways to shape ethical futures within digital ecologies.

Simplifying, Performing, and Laughing: How Digital Humor Influencers Shape Everyday Life

André Luiz de Souza-Leão, Grayci Kelli Patrocínio, Jéssica Maria Morais

Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil

Abstract

Digital influencers emerge as pivotal agents in the production and mediation of cultural meanings in consumption. Humor has become a central strategy for digital influencers, transforming everyday life into a space for cultural resignification. In this context, TikTok stands out as a platform fostering short-form comedic content that enables influencers to mediate cultural meanings and reinterpret everyday consumption practices through humor. This research explores how do digital humor influencers from distinct cultural contexts signify everyday life. The investigation focuses on two influencers: Khaby Lame, celebrated for his minimalist visual humor and transcultural appeal, and GKay, a Brazilian influencer who employs exaggerated performances to engage audiences through representations of Brazilian culture and pop culture. Drawing on Michel de Certeau and Mikhail Bakhtin, the analysis anchors itself in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) framework. De Certeau conceptualizes everyday life as a space where individuals employ tactics to navigate and resignify dominant cultural structures, highlighting humor as a form of creative subversion. Bakhtin's notions of carnivalization and grotesque realism complement this perspective by illustrating how humor inverts hierarchies, destabilizes norms, and fosters collective meaning-making. Together, these frameworks provide a lens to examine humor's role in resignifying consumption practices, mediating cultural experiences, and challenging established social conventions. The method adopted was netnography. In order to ensure a deeper engagement with the online culture investigated, this study integrates a multi-layered approach, combining (1) investigative data, analyzing 129 posts by Khaby Lame and 369 posts by GKay (July 2023–June 2024), and (2) immersive data, collected through six months of weekly journals (February–August 2024). The findings highlight both specific and shared dimensions among the influencers. For Khaby, the dimension Global Simplification of Everyday Life reveals how visual humor and irony reconfigure universal practices, elevating simplicity and functionality as cultural ideals. GKay embodies the dimension Cultural Performativity of Everyday Life, marked by exaggerated performances that foreground Brazilian identity and connect consumption practices to local values. Both influencers converge in the dimension Humor as Cultural Mediation of Everyday Life, wherein humor bridges cultural meanings, market practices, and identity narratives. The comparative analysis underscores how global and local consumption practices are not only reinterpreted but also framed through distinct humor styles: Khaby emphasizes simplicity as a transcultural value, while GKay amplifies the emotional and performative dimensions of local identity. In light of the adopted theories, De Certeau helps interpret Khaby as an agent of global tactics that subvert social practices by resignifying functionality and simplicity. Conversely, GKay uses performances as cultural tactics, aligned with diverse aspects of Brazilian identity, creating emotional connections with her audience. In both cases, humor promotes carnivalization (Bakhtin), exposing cultural absurdities and subverting social practices through laughter. The study's contributions to CCT are significant. It expands the understanding of how digital influencers integrate humor into consumption, highlights humor as a key tool in cultural meaning-making, and underscores TikTok's role in fostering humor as cultural production. Ultimately, it advances debates on the interplay between humor, cultural mediation, and consumption in the digital age.

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Enrolling Creators: Platform Logics in the Digital Fashion Market

Gokcen Coskuner-Balli[1], Burcak Ertimur[2]

[1]Chapman University, Irvine, USA. [2]Skema University, Lille, France

Abstract

A new wave of fashion platforms that are exclusively digital has recently emerged alongside the launch of metaverses that allow the creation of digital wearables as non-fungible tokens (Baek et al. 2022; Joy et al. 2022; Park 2022). This study explores the rise of these Web 3.0 digital fashion platforms governed by blockchain technology (Murray, Kim, and Combs 2022). It relies on the creator economy (Peres et al. 2024) as new organizational forms within the fashion market.

Marketing scholars have underscored platforms' roles as enablers of co-creation (Scaraboto and Figueiredo 2021). Perren and Kozinets (2019) identify different digital platforms that facilitate exchange among actors and create value (e.g., matchmakers pairing actors). Wichman, Wiegand, and Reinartz (2022) show how brands can meet consumer goals like social exchange and creative empowerment through their platforms by facilitating crowdsourcing and crowdsending. Research also highlights value creation challenges via platforms due to power asymmetry among platform owners, creators, and brands (Arsel, Zanette, and da Rocha Melo 2024; Bei and Geilens 2023; Scaraboto and Fischer 2024). Outside of marketing, studies have also begun to explore how platforms shape creativity through governance mechanisms, incentive structures, and algorithmic controls (Duffy et al. 2019; Gardiner 2024). Inspired by these works, we ask: How do platforms enroll creators? And what are the ensuing consequences for creativity?

We combine netnography with archival data to address these questions, collecting and capturing investigative, interactive, and immersive data (Fischer and Parmentier 2024; Kozinets and Gretzel 2024). Our archival sources include newspaper articles containing the term "digital fashion" or "virtual fashion" (n = 177) and industry reports (n = 17). We supplement these data with secondary interviews with platform founders (n = 70). For our netnography, we began by auditing a 35-hour digital fashion course, which exposed us to digital creation tools and solutions and their impact on fashion value chains. Then, focusing on new platforms and digital-only brands (n = 16), we examined their missions and visions and images of virtual creations on their platforms, followed by their social media posts and unfolding conversations. We started recording our reflections on the practices and discourses of platforms in enrolling creators via journal entries. Data collection and analysis are ongoing.

Our findings indicate that, as new organizational forms, Web3 digital fashion platforms allow decentralized online experiences and more control over creative content. Yet, as their sustenance rests

on the creator economy (i.e., fashion designers, 3D creators), they engage in concerted efforts to recruit creators. The preliminary themes encapsulate the use of three logics towards this end and the corresponding myths regarding creativity. The first logic revolves around sustainability and moralizes creation by emphasizing the long-lasting quality of digital fashion. The second logic is based on community/inclusivity, emphasizing access instead of exclusivity when it comes to creation tools and democratizing creativity. The third logic is innovation/art, which implies limitless creativity freed from the constraints of gravity. The findings hold implications for platform practices and the work that maintains organizational forms.

Creative Netnography: Exploring CRM Strategies for SMEs in Metaverse Fashion Communities

Sidra Junaid

University of Brighton, Brighton, United Kingdom

Abstract

The integration of metaverse technologies with Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems offers fashion SMEs transformative opportunities to deliver personalized and immersive customer experiences. This study explores how SMEs leverage CRM strategies within metaverse platforms, focusing on Decentraland and Zepeto, to foster engagement, build loyalty, and co-create value.

The metaverse provides a dynamic digital environment where virtual try-ons, digital fashion collections, and blockchain-based transparency redefine customer interactions. Existing literature highlights the potential of immersive marketing technologies (IMT), such as augmented and virtual reality, in enhancing customer experiences (Kumar et al., 2023). However, gaps remain in understanding their application within the SME context, particularly regarding CRM practices (Hasani et al., 2024). This study addresses these gaps by examining how SMEs navigate and optimize CRM strategies within metaverse fashion communities.

This research employs a netnographic approach combined with case study methodology for a comprehensive analysis. Over six months, data will be collected through observation of SME-customized spaces in Decentraland and Zepeto, analysis of user interactions and content, and interviews with SME personnel managing CRM. This approach offers detailed insights into digital behaviors, marketing strategies, and tools used by SMEs.

Key CRM elements such as AI-driven personalization, authenticity, and content co-creation are central to this study. AI tools help SMEs enhance interactions and engagement, while authenticity is explored through virtual influencers and user-generated content, vital for trust and loyalty.

Challenges like data security and trust, addressed by blockchain technologies, and competitive advantages through strategic agility (Abrokwah-Larbi, 2024) are explored. The study situates findings within broader digital ecosystems, comparing metaverse CRM efforts with traditional social networking sites.

Additionally, this research explores the technological infrastructure required for SMEs to thrive in the metaverse, including the costs and scalability of immersive technologies. It highlights the role of community-driven innovation, where customers actively participate in product development, enhancing the SME's responsiveness to market trends. The study also investigates ethical considerations, such

as data privacy, consent in virtual interactions, and equitable access to metaverse tools for small businesses.

A practical framework will be developed to guide SMEs in adopting effective CRM practices in immersive digital environments, contributing to literature on digital marketing and CRM. This framework will offer step-by-step guidance, covering aspects such as selecting the right platforms, integrating AI tools, ensuring data security, and measuring customer engagement.

Keywords: Netnography, Metaverse Fashion, SME, Customer Relationship Management, Immersive Technologies

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Session 17: Memetics and metaverses

“Surprise, Mr. Brand”: Doing Netnography of a Memetic (Counter-) Culture

Robert V. Kozinets[1], Rossella C. Gambetti[2]

[1]University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA. [2]Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

Abstract

It is widely known that the word-of-mouth marketing that takes place through social media does not simply “transmit” marketing messages, but that marketing messages and brand meanings are transformed and altered by their encounters with consumers and their culture (Kozinets et al., 2010). When people transform a brand’s meanings and messages and share them on social media, the brand gains cultural resonance but brand management relinquishes – or simply loses – control of the messages (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This type of loss of message control is on full display on the Internet in the phenomenon of meme culture.

Contemporary meme culture is a wildly participatory phenomenon that combines humor, social commentary, and shared experiences into rapidly evolving digital artifacts (Jenkins et al., 2017). Memes function as a type of cultural shorthand; they encode complex cultural concepts into visually and textually concise forms, under the guise of trivial amusement. Like social contagions, they spread virally across platforms, shaping public discourse, reinforcing identities, and sometimes mobilizing collective action.

Extant literature has explored some of the nuances of meme culture’s daring acts of brand manipulation and re-appropriation (Shifman, 2012, 2014). However, there is still much more to say about the moral amplitude and performative vectors of these ever-juicy morsels of cybercultural craftiness. In this study, we look at how a brand that sought to use social media marketing to take over, domesticate, and manipulate elements of consumer culture to spread its brand messages ended up getting shafted at the same time by consumers who refused to play their game. With their free access and capacity to use and communicate about brands in digital platforms, these consumers take over, transform, and counter-communicate undesired—and true!—brand meanings and messages in their own loosely bound flows of interactions.

In this work, we explain a netnographic research design (Kozinets, 2020) we developed to examine how this type of operation occurs where youth culture meets e-cigarette brand marketing, which offers an exemplar territory where these factors are at play. By tracking elements of social media participatory culture such as memetic content related to major e-cigarette brands, and by relating it to the viral marketing efforts of these e-cigarette companies, we reveal the weird crossovers of tobacco marketing, social media, and the participatory culture of GenZ consumer collectives. After immersing in numerous platforms where e-cigarette memes circulate and conducting a comparative content analysis, we perform a hermeneutic interpretation of our corpus of vaping memes that handles these delirious online traces as signifiers of counter-communicating countercultural meaning.

Our findings reveal intriguing double-sidedness. The supposedly infiltrated youth collectives who adopted a consumerist vaping “lifestyle” expose (intentionally or unintentionally) the hidden meanings and potentially illicit actions related to youth vaping. Our examination offers a deeper look into the regions where social media marketing becomes a prompt for communal creativity, where ethical boundaries and legal restrictions blur together, and where altered brand meanings and messages in consumer communications rapidly shoot out far beyond the capacity of brands or their managers to alter them.

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“We can’t have anything to ourselves”: Collective Creativity and the Communal-Commercial Tension around Internet Memes within Black Twitter

Tala Almaghrabi[1], Michael Heller[2], Jessica Chelekis[1]

[1]Brunel University of London, London, United Kingdom. [2]Northumbria University, Newcastle, United Kingdom

Abstract

Social media marketers increasingly appropriate internet memes to engage online users (Vardeman, 2023). However, they often overlook the complex meanings and cultural significance of these memes, particularly within marginalised communities. For Black Twitter, internet memes are tools for connection, cultural expression, resistance, and the sharing of lived experiences. Black Twitter is a recognised cultural force (Wheeler, 2019), creating memes that influence mainstream digital culture. However, any potential for resistance or liberation through memes can be undermined by brand co-optation, leading to the (mis)use and (mis)appropriation of these memes, and the failure of crediting the original creators (Sobande, 2022).

Drawing on the works of Sobande (2019, 2022) and addressing calls for more research into marginalised communities’ digital practices, this study investigates how Black Twitter navigates the tensions between collective creativity and commercial exploitation in meme creation and consumption. Employing an 18-month netnographic study (Kozinets, 2019), data was collected via Twitter (X) in the form of brand-community interactions. Data was analysed using discourse analysis at three levels: first, examining the linguistic features of tweets to understand how discursive strategies are constructed; second, identifying discursive themes and subjects; and third, exploring social practices to uncover how local realities are created (Fairclough, 2013).

A metanarrative of 'The People vs. the Corporation' emerged from the community, wherein members constructed themselves as 'commoners'—a collective without privilege or distinction—juxtaposed against the rigid and commodified corporation. While the community acknowledges their influence in shaping digital culture, this narrative is rooted in a tension between their perceived power and their

framing as ordinary individuals resisting commercial co-option. Building on this, three key discursive themes emerged: authenticity, capitalism, and ownership. Authenticity was central to defining how memes should be used. This discourse was enacted to establish who qualifies as an 'insider' or 'outsider,' as well as assessing the motivations behind brands' use of memes. Discourses of capitalism were mobilised to critique the commodification of internet memes by brands for profit. Discourses of ownership stressed that memes are products of collective creativity within the community and were enacted to argue for recognition and compensation to the community when brands adopt their content.

This study provides insights for marketers on engaging authentically with diverse online communities, as well as solutions for fostering inclusive practices in social media marketing. It contributes to a broader understanding of how marginalised communities use memes to consolidate identity, resist exploitation, and assert agency on social media.

Keywords: Online Communities, Internet Memes, Discourse Analysis.

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Shopping in the Metaverse: Consumer insights from Netnography

Mehrgan Malekpour[1], Oswin Maurer[1], Vincenzo Basile[2], Gabriele Baima[3]

[1]Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Bolzano, Italy. [2]Federico II University of Naples,, Naples, Italy. [3]University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Abstract

This study delves into customer expectations and experiences of food and grocery shopping in the metaverse, focusing on how these factors influence satisfaction and dissatisfaction with virtual platforms. Utilizing a qualitative netnographic methodology, customer reactions to Walmart and McDonald virtual store demonstration were analyzed through comments on YouTube and Reddit. Thematic analysis revealed key factors shaping customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in metaverse food and grocery shopping. Three significant satisfiers (engaging social stimuli, functional stimuli and hedonic stimuli) and eight main dissatisfiers (Functional-related stimuli, hedonic-related stimuli, social-related stimuli, financial-related stimuli, privacy-related stimuli, safety-related stimuli, ownership-related stimuli, store atmospheric-related stimuli) were identified. This research advances empirical understanding of metaverse technologies in food service and grocery shopping, offering valuable insights into customer expectations, adoption motivators, and challenges.

Lantern Culture in the Digital Age: Augmenting and Reimagining Festivals Through Virtual Experiences

Alex Fenton[1], Huang Lei[2], Qi Zhang[2], Shiyu Qian[1]

[1]University of Chester, Chester, United Kingdom. [2]Sichuan University of Science & Engineering, Yibin, China

Abstract

This paper explores traditional Chinese lantern festivals in the digital age, focusing on how festival-goers narrate and share and experience lantern culture through social media and virtual reality (VR). As cultural events increasingly intersect with digital technologies, the study explores how balances can be maintained to experience or preserve cultural events.

The research also explores how technology can contribute to or enhance cultural traditions contributing to ongoing debates surrounding the role of technology in cultural preservation for new generations of people. We explore the transformative potential of immersive experiences in altering the way we engage with lantern festivals by exploring the following questions:

> RQ1. How do attendees of lantern festivals publicly articulate their experiences on social media platforms?
>
> RQ2. How do people feel about experiencing Chinese lantern culture through social media and virtual reality?

This study builds on existing research and calls for research at the intersection of cultural heritage and digital technology, examining the use of VR for cultural preservation. Additionally, it reflects on the challenges that traditional festivals face and how these barriers might be overcome or amplified through digital experiences.

Netnography is a critical tool for understanding leisure experiences in digital environments. This not only emphasises the increasing importance of social media in capturing and documenting cultural events but also looks towards the evolving nature of technology and netnography beyond web 2.0 and the broader implications of immersive technology for human experiences of the future.

Our study analyses social media posts on platforms including TikTok and DouYin, focusing on how festival attendees describe and share their lantern festival experiences (RQ1). We also utilise Kozinets (2023) adaption of netnography as a method to research service experience research in virtual reality to research lantern festival experiences (RQ2). The representation of cultural festivals, including lantern festivals, remains limited and Kozinets calls for further research also to explore the wider aspects of people's human experience through immersive technology and the transporting experiences it produces. Our research incorporates an immersion journal based on reflections, posts, comments, and interactions, offering insights into the ways participants engage with both virtual and physical lantern festival experiences. We analyse the data through a lens of social capital theory to understand the role of trust and values in the digital and physical interactions.

The findings so far suggest that social media and virtual reality technologies offer valuable opportunities to extend and enhance the traditional lantern festival experience, allowing for broader accessibility and new forms of interaction. Challenges arising from traditional events can also be addressed digitally. However, the research underscores the importance of striking a balance between the physical and digital realms to ensure the continued preservation and vitality of lantern festivals as a form of cultural

heritage. While technology can help evolve cultural practices, the future of such traditions will depend on how effectively we can integrate immersive experiences without overshadowing the physical event.

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Session 18: Autonetnography, embodiment and identity

Schrödinger's Diabetes: An autonetnography of social media health information seeking between identification of health concern and diagnosis

Lisa Garwood-Cross

Univerversity of Salford, Manchester, United Kingdom

Abstract

The netnographer stands in the middle of the online environment, weaving a path through images, comments, information, videos and more to investigate a phenomena. However, this experience is not exclusive to the netnographer; but one many people appear to undertake when seeking health information online, except the phenomena they investigate is the concerns they have for their own health.

Existing research has established that social media plays an ongoing role in some individuals health information seeking (Zhao & Zhang, 2017; Neely et al., 2021) often led by a need for uncertainty reduction. Utilising social media as an information source has been found to help meet individuals health information needs, increase health-literacy and provide peer-support around health-related concerns (Zhao & Zhang, 2017). However, the accuracy of information of social media content is as an ongoing concern of health consumers (Lin et al., 2016).

Current literature has relied heavily on surveys and quantitative methodologies to understand social media health information seeking, however little is known about how social media is used in the gap between identifying a health concern and receiving a diagnosis, or the emotional and personal journeys individuals undergo through this process. Therefore, this paper places the author in the dual position of both health information seeker and netnographer. Investigating the researcher's own personal experiences of her 8-week autonetnographic exploration of seeking information about diabetes on social media [predominantly focusing on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok] while waiting for results from her doctor to discover if she was diabetic. The paper uses immersion journaling as a tool to identify the complex emotional processes involved in consuming health content, and how and why certain content might be consumed or favoured over others. In doing so this autonetnography examinines the sensitive state prior to diagnosis which I refer to as 'Schrödinger's diabetes', where much like Schrödinger's Cat who may be both alive or dead until you open the box, until diagnosis the information-seeker sits in the uncertain position of both having and not having diabetes.

The findings demonstrate a complicated and vulnerable period of health information seeking, where an absence of clinician-provided information can lead to exposure to an overwhelming amount of alternative information on social media. Whilst relatable, bitesize, shame-free and simplified content can provide new ways of engaging with diabetes awareness, incorrect and confusing information was also found. Finally, this paper grapples with a complex question – what if, after all your information seeking, when you open the box you don't have diabetes at all?

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Decoding Overtourism in Xi'an: A Netnographic and Interview-Based Exploration of Market Dynamics and Sustainable Strategies

Chee Wei Cheah, QIngYi Gao

Shenzhen MSU-BIT University, Shenzhen, China

Abstract

Overtourism, where visitor numbers exceed a destination's sustainable capacity, has profound implications for local economies, cultural heritage preservation, and the overall tourism industry (Walmsley et al., 2022). While previous research has extensively examined overtourism in Western contexts, studies focusing on China's historical cities, particularly in relation to domestic tourism dominance and infrastructure constraints, remain scarce (Song & Wondirad, 2023). This study addresses this gap by investigating overtourism in Xi'an—one of China's most historically significant cities—using a netnographic approach complemented by in-depth interviews as a data triangulation strategy to enhance trustworthiness.

Netnography, an ethnographic method adapted for digital spaces, enables researchers to analyze authentic tourist experiences, motivations, and perceptions as they naturally unfold in publicly available online content (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). This study systematically examines social media discussions, travel forums, and online reviews to identify key themes, trends, and influential actors in the discourse on Xi'an's tourism challenges. Unlike traditional surveys, which may be subject to response bias, netnography captures real-time, unsolicited interactions, offering a more nuanced understanding of tourist behaviors and sentiments.

To validate and enrich the netnographic findings, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key opinion leaders, tourism advocates, local business owners, and frequent contributors to online tourism discussions. These interviews will serve as an avenue to verify insights derived from netnographic analysis, ensuring that interpretations are accurate and reflective of on-the-ground realities. By adopting this dual-method approach, the study enhances the reliability of its findings and offers a comprehensive exploration of how overtourism reshapes Xi'an's tourism landscape.

Xi'an holds a profound place in Chinese history as the capital of 13 dynasties, including the Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties, over a span of more than 3,000 years. Known historically as Chang'an, the city marks the Silk Road's eastern terminus and is a repository of China's imperial heritage. With attractions such as the Terracotta Army, ancient city walls, and vibrant cultural markets, Xi'an embodies a rich blend of history and modernity. In 2023, Xi'an attracted an extraordinary 278 million visitors, underscoring its global allure as a premier travel destination.

Xi'an's tourism dynamics are shaped by three unique factors:

1. Protected Archaeological Zones Restrict Infrastructure Development. Unlike cities such as Barcelona or Venice, where infrastructure expansion is possible, Xi'an's UNESCO World Heritage status imposes

strict limitations on development. Urban expansion near protected sites like the Terracotta Army, ancient city walls, and Han Yang Ling Mausoleum is legally restricted, leading to transportation bottlenecks and accommodation shortages. Metro lines and roads cannot be expanded near key heritage zones, exacerbating congestion. Hotels and restaurants face zoning restrictions, driving up prices and limiting access to affordable housing for residents.

2. Domestic Tourism Dominance Amplifies Pressures. While overtourism in European destinations is often driven by international arrivals, over 90% of Xi'an's tourists are domestic travelers. National holidays such as *Golden Week* (May 1st and October 1st) create overwhelming surges, leading to severe overcrowding in areas like the Muslim Quarter and Bell Tower. Unlike Kyoto or Santorini, which implement international visitor quotas, Xi'an struggles to regulate these seasonal fluctuations. Additionally, *cultural commodification* is accelerating as traditional markets increasingly cater to mass domestic tastes, eroding authentic local practices.

3.Balancing Economic Dependency and Cultural Preservatio. Tourism contributes over 15% of Xi'an's GDP, making it an economic pillar. However, reliance on tourism distorts local job markets, with younger residents shifting from traditional industries to low-wage service jobs. Furthermore, environmental degradation at sites like the Terracotta Army is worsening due to high foot traffic and pollution. While measures such as digital ticketing systems and off-peak travel promotions are being tested, solutions remain constrained by rigid preservation laws and domestic political realities.

The findings are expected to propose actionable strategies to address over-tourism. Local tourist operators can diversify tourism products, implement time-slot ticketing, promote off-peak travel, and adopt sustainable practices to distribute visitor flows and minimize environmental impacts. Domestic tourists are encouraged to practice responsible tourism by avoiding peak seasons, supporting local businesses, and respecting cultural heritage. Policymakers play a critical role by enforcing visitor caps at iconic sites, integrating tourism across regions, enhancing infrastructure, and raising awareness about sustainability through education and regulations.

These collaborative strategies aim to preserve Xi'an's historical and cultural treasures, enhance the competitiveness of its tourism industry, and promote sustainable development. By integrating these outcomes, the study emphasizes the importance of aligning historical context, stakeholder actions, and innovative methodologies to address the pressing issue of over-tourism in one of China's most iconic cities.

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Fashion, Video Games, and the Grotesque: An Auto-Netnographic Exploration

Florentin Remond

IAE Paris-Sorbonne, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, France

Abstract

This auto-netnographic study explores the aesthetic interplay between fashion and video games, not as isolated domains but as converging spaces where postmodern representation and narrative collide. Anchored in the author's personal (and fervent) journey to reconcile two aesthetic grammars that appeared entirely at odds, it uses auto-netnography as an epistemological lens to deconstruct and subsequently reconstitute these disparate imaginaries into a unified aesthetic discourse (Kaiser et al., 1991).

Central to this inquiry is the concept of the grotesque canon, traditionally associated with the collision of opposites and the disruption of established aesthetic norms (Granata, 2013; Steig, 1970). Within the representation of fashion in video games, the grotesque is not a mere stylistic effect but rather a structural logic that highlights the tension between the corporeal and the virtual, the beautiful and the bizarre. As video game aesthetics amplify fashion's potential for experimentation, they also distort, exaggerate, and transform, creating figures that challenge conventional ideals of taste and form.

These representations find their most vivid embodiment in the avatar itself, the explorer of digital worlds and a critical locus for the merging of personal narratives and communal ideations. As philosopher Mathieu Triclot's "human-machine position" suggests (Triclot, 2017), the avatar exemplifies the collaborative dynamic between human creativity and computational mediation. It operates as a liminal and symbolic space where the porous boundaries between corporeality and digital abstraction are continuously negotiated. With consideration for the grotesque canon, avatars—through their exaggerated and hybridized aesthetics—become potent symbols of postmodern identity, simultaneously deconstructing and reimagining the human form.

If fashion is indeed a "total social fact" (Monneyron, 2021), the avatar and its fashion-related artifacts emerges as the ultimate representation of the concept of technogenesis: the symbiotic and reciprocal evolution of humanity and its technologies (Kozinets, 2015). The avatar, with its grotesque yet alluring aesthetic, serves as the ultimate embodiment of this technogenetic fusion, a site where human agency and digital abstraction coalesce to produce a radical reimagining of both fashion and identity. This symbiosis not only reflects the fragmented realities of postmodernity but also amplifies fashion's capacity to function as a dynamic cultural force in the digital age.

The research is visually anchored by a curated collection of images assembled over several years by the author, juxtaposing high-fashion runway excerpts with representations of fashion within video games. These visuals, further manipulated and remanipulated through generative AI, underscore the grotesque's role in bridging fashion and video games aesthetics, and further, the physical and virtual.

This iterative engagement, driven by the "human-machine position", has evolved into a methodological strategy – where the inherent reflexivity of auto-netnography (Kozinets, 2020) is both an analytical tool but an active mode of meaning-making, blurring the line between research and creative production. In this sense, auto-netnography is no longer merely a methodological framework but becomes a performative act, wherein the researcher's digital embodiments materialize as critical interventions into the aesthetic possibilities afforded by fashion in video games.

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Connective spaces for auto(n)ethnographic transformations

Carolina Zanette

Neoma, Rouen, France

Abstract

We present a tentative method for creating dialogical digital spaces where autoethnography can be collectively enacted, with purposes of both social and researcher transformation. Feminist authors in neighboring fields (Clavijo & Mandalaki, 2024; Kaasila-Pakanen et al., 2024) highlight how collective autoethnographies can connect and heal. These, due to their dialogical nature, can result in original and defiant types of theorizing (Cunnlife, 2022), bringing fresh perspectives.

However, past works overlook the creation and governance of spaces that afford connection and healing. Netnographic methodologies can be useful in filling this gap, contributing to autoethnographic methods and highlighting the importance of dialogue during netnographic research. Specifically, certain phenomena (for example, vulnerability, affect, and intersectionality) can be particularly well explored through data collected from such spaces, having interactions as the main data corpus (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2024).

We propose a three step method for the creation of connection and healing spaces. It derives from our experience. Since 2022, we, three Latin American authors with academic careers in Western Europe have been dialoguing in a WhatsApp Group. We discussed our racial experiences and our different shades of whiteness and Otherness. The result of these dialogues became a manuscript presented in different academic conferences currently under Revise and Resubmit in a reputable journal, with positive feedback on our methods. However, going beyond the theorization of the focal phenomenon (race in migration), these dialogues transformed our lives. One of us became more acutely aware of their privileges, changing how they interact with and mentor others. Another of us became more vocal and resistant about their discomfort in situations where they are being racialized by Western Europeans, feeling empowered. The third finally found solace in understanding her intersectional positionality. Importantly, these personal transformations were decisive for the theorization of the focal phenomenon itself.

Therefore, we suggest that to create connecting and healing spaces that transform while becoming data and analysis, researchers should: (1) Create a digital space permeated by dialogical and multimodal affordances. Asynchronous communication, text, audio, images, gifs and memes are fundamental for dialogical richness; (2) Foster trust, openness and confidentiality: personal, political and theoretical conflate. Being non-judgemental is paramount for informants to be comfortable to share; and (3) Consider the personal is theoretical: theorizing becomes a collective process that re-enacts feelings, emotions, and affects, and helps develop epistemic humility. Data and theorization conflate reflexively.

Keywords: netnography, collaborative autoethnography, reflexivity

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Day 3 – 30th of May

Session 19: Politics and ideologies in social media discourse

"Like a bunch of God damn hypocrites": The Impact of Canadian Political reddit on Second-Order Beliefs

Valérie Kindarji

University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

In this study, I join a growing scholarship assessing democratic resilience in the face of challenges of a disordered information ecosystem. Most scholarship has focused on the first-order effects of disordered information, assessing the direct impact of users' interactions with disordered information. I complement this growing body of literature by focusing on the second-order effects, asking how disordered information does not impact our beliefs, but it also distorts our perception of what others believe. Using reddit as the site of my research, I also assess precisely how platform affordances impact second-order beliefs by discouraging democratic discourse and rhetoric.

In this paper, I argue that democracies which have passively outsourced the public square to social media platforms will be more vulnerable to the problematic effects of disordered information. Most democracies have failed to provide concerted digital literacy training and transparent digital democracy frameworks. In doing so, they have passively outsourced state-citizen interaction and information flows to a disordered information environment, increasing the likelihood that citizens will develop distorted perceptions of democratic institutions and of other citizens. By analyzing the specific interactions between users in digital communities, I argue that platform affordances restrict and encourage certain types of speech fundamentally incompatible with democratic discourse. More particularly, I argue that the architecture and built incentives in social media platforms do not allow for the rhetorical exchange conducive to democratic discourse. I also leverage a combination of democratic discourse theory and novel conversational tools such as Street Epistemology and collaborative decision-making to argue that lacking from the digital public square is the ability to ask clarifying questions and to engage in the empathetic exchange of ideas. Failure to deepen understanding of opponents' positions and ideological reasonings makes it extremely challenging to develop the empathy and compromise necessary to build and maintain a healthy democratic system.

I conduct a Netnography and discourse analysis (using NVIVO) on Canadian political subreddits. The goal is to understand how users interact in the comment sections of news article posts on political subreddits, paying particular attention to the language used, and to the context and nature of these exchanges, including reddit "flairs" and subreddit-specific constraints. To analyze these exchanges more systematically, I operationalize "interpersonal trust/distrust" and "democratic deliberation" by looking at established literature on how these elements are manifested in conversation. I use this as a basis to analyze the content of these comments. The subreddits analyzed include (but not limited to): r/canada; r/OnGuardForThee; r/CanadianConservative; r/ CanadaPolitics.

Thicker Understanding of Media: A Netnographic Study of Refugee Perceptions

Selin Türkel[1], Ebru Uzunoğlu[1,2], Altuğ Akın[1], Tuğbay Bilbay[1]

[1]Izmir University of Economics, Izmir, Turkey. [2]University of Ljubljana Faculty of Social Sciences, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Abstract

Migration is a major global issue of the 21st century. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 120 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, with over 4 million in Turkey due to geopolitical reasons (Tunaboylu, 2024).

Integration of refugees into society is a challenging (Alakoc et al. 2023) and multifaceted (Zihnioğlu& Dalkıran, 2022) process for receiving and migrating communities, ideally aiming for coexistence based on mutual respect and understanding (Al-Hamad et al. 2024). However, widespread dislike, if not hate, against Syrian refugees in Turkey highlights departure from this ideal, similar to many countries in the world hosting significant populations of refugees and migrants. Factors such as temporary protection status and uncertainty (Tunaboylu, 2024), deficiencies in integration policies (Şimşek, 2020), and anti-refugee discourse (Yılmaz et al. 2023) negatively impact refugee integration and social cohesion.

In framing theory, choice of sources and language is crucial in shaping perceptions about refugees. For instance, hate speech leads to marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion (Aldamen, 2023). Similarly, politically oriented sources often frame refugees as threats (Kuş, 2016). Alternatively, nongovernmental organizations try to foster humanitarian understanding (Axster, 2023). Media language also impacts perceptions: terms like ‘illegal’ or ‘criminal immigrant’ could legitimize discrimination (Pandır, 2020), whereas ‘brothers and sisters’ or ‘survivors’ (Efe, 2019) might encourage a positive, humanitarian view. Given such critical role media could play in shaping negative discourses (Williams et al. 2024) about refugees, we aim to answer how media narratives are constructed, and refugee children - most vulnerable group in the migration debates- are framed within these narratives.

Following Kozinets and Gretzel (2023)'s steps of netnography, after identifying research question, immersion is followed to collect overarching data, record self-reflections, and provide additional context for analysis. We analyzed representation of refugee children by focusing on social media outputs of journalists with the highest number of YouTube subscribers, ensuring a range of diverse political perspectives. We kept an immersion journal, collecting data from social media posts and user comments “until theoretical saturation is achieved” and reflect on our experiences. During interaction movement, five focus groups were conducted with Syrian refugees living in Hatay, Istanbul and Izmir. In these, refugee experiences and needs were probed to gather rich data. The most promising insight from the interviews was the examples of 'successful refugee girls'. Two successful refugee girls were interviewed alongside their parents and schoolteacher to gain insights into environmental factors that contributed to their success. Additionally for the interaction movement, we plan to craft short stories with defined beginnings, inspired by the focus groups and interviews. These stories will be shared on YouTube, inviting participants to complete missing parts. Finally, in integration phase, data will be analyzed separately by two researchers, and results will be shared via AI-generated video.

Consequently, we aim to guide media professionals and institutions in promoting positive and realistic portrayals of refugee children while inspiring comprehensive and effective media efforts to protect their rights and support their social integration. https://youtu.be/X28BjGgd0F4

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Framing corruption: A comparative study during national election campaigns in Bulgaria, France and Italy

Todor Galev[1], Virginie Vial[2], Alfredo Jimenez[2], Rita Marchetti[3], Anna Stanziano[3], Aleksej Heinze[2], Julien Hanoteau[2]

[1]CSD, Sofia, Bulgaria. [2]KEDGE Business School, Marseille, France. [3]University of Perugia, Perugia, Italy

Abstract

This study examines the public discussion on corruption in pre-election and election campaigns across France, Italy, and Bulgaria. The research addresses the growing disconnect between academic discourse on corruption and public understanding, aiming to bridge this gap by analyzing the role of social media in expressing and shaping perceptions of corruption (Marchetti & Stanziano, 2024). Corruption can be perceived either through moral disengagement - such as blaming corruption-related behavior - or through inhibiting unethical behavior in "creative" ways. These include diffusing responsibility, blaming the victims, or claiming that the outcomes serve a higher purpose (Li et al., 2023).

Employing institutional theory as a theoretical framework, this study investigates how corruption is socially expressed, constructed, and addressed in the public sphere.

The research focuses on three key questions:

1. who discusses corruption,
2. how they define it, and
3. what forms of corruption are prevalent in public discourse.

The study utilizes a comparative case study approach, analyzing social media data from three European countries during three months preceding their last national elections. We focus on Facebook as the main social media platform due to its popularity across these three countries. These countries were selected based on their perceived corruption levels (Transparency International, 2023) and the researchers' linguistic and social expertise. The research team are from business school, a non-governmental organisation focusing on democracy and policy lelve researchers. The initiation stage of Netnographic analysis started through data collection involving scraping public Facebook pages, groups, and profiles using CrowdTangle, focusing on the last two parliamentary elections for each country and based on a predefined list of corruption-related keywords. This was followed by the cleaning of data sets, followed by the identification of main sub-topics and actors in individual countries. Next, the three stages and six movements of netnography (Kozinets, 2020) were followed, and content analysis to classify and cluster accounts associated with specific political parties. Creation of immersion journals by multiple researchers per country, then integrated into a master version (Integration stage). This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how different actors shape the discourse on corruption and the incarnation of new meanings of corruption as shaped by Facebook communities (and consequent limitations).

Preliminary findings suggest that social media, once seen as a democratizing tool, may be currently weaponized by opinion leaders and political parties to manipulate corruption narratives.

The study's findings have implications for policymakers, anti-corruption initiatives, and future research on the intersection of social media and political discourse. Future work will triangulate these case study findings with big data analysis and experimental testing to further validate and expand upon the results.

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The exoticization of Eastern Europe: a postcolonial netnographic study of western imaginaries

Tomasz Serwanski[1], Aleksej Heinze[2], Romas Malevicius[3]

[1]SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland. [2]KEDGE Business School, Marseille, France. [3]King's College London, London, United Kingdom

Abstract

This study explores the racialization and exoticization of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) within Western imaginaries through the lens of postcolonial theory. Focusing on the portrayal of Eastern European brands, foods, fashion trends ("post-Soviet chic") and "hidden gem" tourism narratives, the research employs a netnographic methodology (Kozinets, 2020) to examine online communities perceptions. The analysis reveals how they are influenced by lingering colonial mindsets that position Eastern Europe as the "Other."

The conceptual foundation of this study is anchored in a burgeoning stream of research in postcolonial theory (Banerjee, 2003; Virdee, 2019) and the specific notion of “Eastern Europeanism” as articulated by Ivan Kalmar (2022). His work expands upon Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, highlighting how the region is constructed as Europe’s “internal other.” He argues that Eastern Europeans are often perceived as “white but not quite,” occupying a liminal space in Western racial hierarchies. Through this theoretical framework, the research examines how online portrayals reinforce cultural and racial divides rooted in a colonial mindset.

The aim of this study is to analyze, with the use of netnography and discourse analysis, the representation of CEE consumption items in digital online media through a postcolonial lens. Data were collected from Instagram, Youtube, Tik Tok, Facebook and X. By integrating postcolonial theory, the analysis focused on themes such as othering, cultural appropriation, and the legacy of colonial attitudes. This approach allows for an immersive investigation into how these representations are constructed and disseminated within online spaces, highlighting the colonial underpinnings of Western perceptions of CEE.

The findings suggest that this exoticization is not merely a benign appreciation but is rooted in longstanding stereotypes that perpetuate cultural hierarchies within the Western psyche. For instance, Polish pierogi or Russian blini are interpreted as mysterious delicacies rather than commonplace foods enjoyed in their countries of origin. Labeling locations as “hidden gems” may imply they are overlooked due to a lack of worthiness, reinforcing perceptions of the region as peripheral. The adoption of "post-Soviet chic" in Western fashion often lacks context and fails to acknowledge the historical and social significance behind the styles, reflecting a colonial appropriation of cultural symbols. In consequence, the complexity of CEE cultures is frequently reduced to simplistic stereotypes, echoing colonial tendencies to homogenize and oversimplify "non-Western" cultures.

The study highlights that the exoticization of Eastern Europe in digital media is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader pattern of prejudice rooted in postcolonial attitudes. It shows that online platforms contribute to the spread of Eastern Europeanism by allowing uncritical sharing and reinforcement of prejudiced views, serving as modern arenas for colonial discourse. By integrating postcolonial studies into the analysis, this research underscores the importance of critically examining Western narratives to foster a more equitable and accurate representation of European cultures.

Keywords: postcolonial theory, exoticization of Eastern Europe

Kalmar, I. (2022), *White but Not Quite*, Bristol.

Kozinets, R. (2020), *Netnography,* SAGE.

Virdee, S. (2019), “Racialized capitalism: An account of its contested origins and consolidation”, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 67/1.

Session 20: Fandoms and participatory worlds

Understanding Brand Storytelling Co-Creation in League of Legends

Isabella Ciampa

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Abstract

Storytelling is frequently considered as one of the most powerful tools in branding (Aimé 2023), a mean to forge connections, cultivate shared imaginaries, and create meaning around a brand (Escalas 2004). Brand storytelling increasingly intersects with fandom phenomena, wherein consumers cultivate profound attachments to certain brands—sometimes to the extent that these attachments resemble religious devotion (Fuschillo, Cayla, and Cova 2024). Yet, how do fans relate to evolving brand narratives over time, and how do they shape the strategic decisions behind them?

This paper addresses that question by examining the League of Legends (LoL) brand and its storytelling dynamics. LoL, launched in 2009 by Riot Games, stands as one of the longest-lasting titles in the gaming industry and a leading name in eSports. A Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) in which players strive for map control and the conquest of the enemy base (Jarrett 2021), LoL boasts between 140 and 160 million monthly active players (wecoach.gg 2024). These players include both casual and professional competitors, but the fandom extends to non-playing fans as well, who dedicate themselves to constructing theories and narratives around the game's over 160 playable champions. These champions constitute the core of LoL, and the brand's monetization relies on cosmetic items rather than gameplay advantages. Each new skin and related accessory reflect LoL's underlying lore, set in the fictional world of Runeterra. For over 15 years, this evolving narrative universe has attracted a global fanbase, drawn in by the adventures and intricate relationships of LoL's characters—making it one of the most enduring and culturally significant brands in contemporary pop culture (Crecente 2019).

This study adopts the League of Legends brand as a case study to explore fandom and transmedia engagement, building on previous scholarship concerning fandom and brand storytelling (Keller 2020; Kozinets 2001). In doing so, the study investigates how brand storytelling develops over time and how fans respond to, reinterpret, and recirculate these stories. Methodologically, the research employs netnography (Kozinets 2019) based on the author's own experience as a LoL player and fan, complemented by in-person ethnographic observations at live LoL events and archival media analysis to trace the evolution of the LoL brand. These methods help illuminate the practices by which fans collectively craft, debate, and sustain the brand storytelling that underpins LoL's cultural resonance.

Preliminary findings indicate that Riot Games does more than simply provide official lore and gameplay updates—it navigates a complex, symbiotic relationship with its fanbase. On one hand, the company capitalizes on the collective creativity of fans, observing how player-generated theories, fan fiction, and narrative expansions can guide future directions for character development and storytelling arcs. This interplay not only helps Riot gauge community sentiment, but it also inspires new official narratives that resonate more deeply with the fan community. On the other hand, the company faces challenges in managing narrative control, authenticity, and brand consistency when fan-driven myth-making diverges from intended narratives.

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Sailing modern Viking fanbases without a compass. How we can get in touch with Nordic narratives and living history communities by means of Viking routes across times and geographies

Elena De Dominicis

None, Vicenza, Italy

Literature review

To analyze about people gathering around a subject related to a place or practices online I read an essay about Cyberfolklore (Dei:2016): nowadays we don’t need anymore to be in a place where main things happens, a “centre”: creative people may not need to live in the artists’ neighbourhood anymore since they could be more productive in a decentralized area. Dei theorizes about what he defines a “relocated settlement distribution"[1] since social dynamics of historic centres have changed: thank to internet they got globalized and local social actors may have lost the power to manage the traditional regional models. Dei cites the “Bausinger Law” according to which identity’s continuity it’s continuously and obsessively rebuilt and mend as log as its framework breaks apart, reconstruction of tradition usually happens conciously at least since the times of Romanticism. This activity is performed by the social groups in order to operate a kind of cultural autobiography and they do it using boundless globalized tools such as social networks. These groups are self referenced: those who join them are people someway bonded with that land, territory or culture. Dei defines this phenomenon as “bottom building mechanism of culture”[2] and it’s given by “cultural familiarity”[3]. It happens a process typical of the hyperconnected society: geographical and administrative borders vanish and recreate on internet to rebuilt memory, commemoration, to secure and preserve what we perceive as valuable, and intangibile patrimony that when it’s institutionally preserved becomes heritage. In another source Dei distinguishes rembering from reenactment[4] and from living history: remembering is more creative,

[1] Dislocazione insediativa decentrata
[2] Meccanismo di costruzione dal basso della cultura
[3] Intimità culturale
[4] Rievocazione e ricostruzione

reenactment is related to an environment or context and neeeds to match with scientific evidences (Dei,2017:15), living history involves institutions as museums, disciplines as applied archeology and it usually takes place near archeological sites and often has an educational purpose. Another source I referred to was the book “Culture On tour, ethnographies of travel” (Bruner:2005) where there are some theorethical aspects about the public featuring and staging the past where Bruner cites an essay about invention of traditions (Hobsbawn and Ranger:1983) and the concept of gaze developed by Urry: he says that gaze is not only the action of looking at something but it’s also a concept about the way, the mood we look at something. I would add also expectations with we look at something, the vision, the cultural filter we use in selecting and giving meaning to what we are looking at. This influences tourism practices in building and collecting and classifying signs that in nowdays communications are called “narrative worlds” that tourists feature in defining places: tourists seeing two persons kissing in Paris they gaze the “timeless, romantic Paris” or a small village in England is gazed as “the real merrie England” (Urry,1990:27). Tourists are interested in signs themselves: the frenchness, the typical italian behaviour, oriental scenes, traditional english pubs. According to Cohen pilgrims’ and tourits’ role are matchable since they have in common a research of a “centre” through the trip. The kind of the trip that depends also by the concept of space. He cites MacCannel and distinguishes five modes of touristic experiences, those who are involved in the topic analized here in my essays are mainly three: experiential, experimental, existential. (Cohen, 1979:183). Experiential mode is that of the recreational tourists, they are alienated by their society, they may search a meaning in the authenticity of others’s life, through an aesthetic experience. Experimental mode is acted by people who research an alternative to the spiritual center of their society they don’t follow anymore. They don’t use traveling only, they can devote themselves to mysticism or take drugs. The existential tourists are fully oriented to an elective spiritual centre, it can be like similar to a religious conversion, moving to remote places, a simple life in the nature, it’s like if they were in exile, their real life is only in the center where the pilgrim re-create the spiritual strenght (1979:190). Bruner defines four meanings of authenticity: verisimilitude, genuiness, originality and authority. About the reconstructed historical village of New Salem in USA he says that costumes of reenacters can be compared to a famous tv series “ Little House on the Pairie”, as if tv productions had a power in shaping a shared perceived imagery. Also, standard and counciousness of authenticity can change in the course of the years (2005:151,154). In the collection “Oltre il Folklore” (Clemente, Mugnaini:2015) Köstlin talks about the Church Boats, used for ceremonies in Dalecarlia in Sweden: in 1973 it was the centennial of the Skansen open air museum and Nordiska Museet in Stokholm. Ethnologist Albert Eskerod wrote a book about the church boats: in 1857 the founder of Nordiska Museet did a trip in Leksand and wrote a detailed journal about that wich became a guide for museum studies as well for nationalistic sentiment expressed by the beauty of the local costumes, admired by all the present people where he said that no boats in the world were so beautiful. Church boats ceremonies became a symbol of Swedish- ness”. Eskerod thought that these local boats discende from vikings’ ones because of archeological findings of nails in the isle of Selleron, where there are the most beautiful boats. The nails were like those used nowadays for the boats and he interpreted this resemblance as a direct continuity, talking about the associations of seafaring workers in germanic areas, Baltic and Flanders model of working. About the ancient arctic saami culture there is an essay by Ligi (Beggiora, 2019:20): saami shamans were considered sorcerers by the protestant missionaries. The tones of samiska sounded to the missionaries as if it was the language of the devil. Saamis’ ecological immersive skills, their ability in moving very quikly on the skis, in detecting invisible traces in snow reflections, understanding the pasture for the rendeers were mistaken for witchcraft power on natural elements and these supposed power were blamed to all the saamis expecially noaidi shamans. Noaidi drums were almost all destroyed by blazes, only 71 survived preserved at Nordiska Museet in Stockholm. about the performance an important book is Turner’s “From Ritual To Theatre”[5]: He explains that the verb “act” entails doing something, playing a role thus transforming and moving something, it’s both fiction and truth. He staged a drama with some students, using ethnographic data about a Ndembu

[5] Italian edition “ Dal Rito al teatro”,1986

ritual of legacy. They didn't have the actul objects involved in the ritual so they used other objects that symbolized them: the tree was played by a broomstick, as the sacred beer they used water. Every student had a role involved in the actual events. The partecipants didn't perceived the play as something unauthentic because the performance of the ritual had moved them closer to the emotional structure of the actual *social drama* and a deep sense of belonging. About runes as magical objects Luisella Sari points out that this anthropological aspects of magic and religion may derive from the practice of carving them (Sari,2020:39) with an intention or a will expressed by who engraved them confering a magical meaning but there is not a real validity about the connection between runes and magic and not all the elder futhark runes are contextualized in magic.

Gathering and organizing data. Detecting frequent topics

The netnographic research has last about six months. These communities are attended by bands and festivals fanbases and management or reenacters at living history events, usually promoted by archeological museums. I gathered datas in order to match them to the later ethnografic field I made in Norway and in Italy, so my relevance was to verify how much what performed online was detectable in person. The attendance of the three fields has been seasonal: the netnographic research has taken place during winter and spring in 2023, the ethnographic field at the open air museum Bostel di Rotzo in July 2023 and the cruise in Norway during the early two weeks in August 2023. I initially divided the netnographic research according to digital "environments". I introduced myself in every social space I've been, as a graduand in anhtropology and declared the topic I was examinating, even in those spaces I already joined previously, asking people to contact me or answer my post if they wanted to talk about some topics. I didn't need to scout socials a lot to check where to find data about these subjects since I already followed, and I'm still following, almost all of these pages, groups or accounts for personal interest so in some cases my activity was both interactive and immersive. Facebook groups and pages and Reddit groups resulted to be the most engaged. The interactions that produce and enrich this new popolar culture create lot of deep data: discussing topics, exchange links, informations about everything concerning the topics, folk and traditional habits and rituals and other contents like videos or pictures and images of creative contents like makeup, tayloring historical dresses, makeup, carving wood and metal works, tattoos, fan art, memes but also many archeologial evidences to discuss about and take inspiration from. I took notes of all the posts and discussions in an ethnographic fieldnote, both those I interacted with and those where my presence wasn't participatory (Kozinet,2020:246,247). I wrote my immersive journal then organized the datas with coloured lists (2020:284): I assigned a colour, sometimes with a symbolic sense, to each detected subject, then created a thematic list according to the colours. I checked the more recurrent colours in the different environments, then selected the more relevants. I chose a color selction because the easiest way to organize written texts, for me, consists in giving them a kind of a visual featuring that, in this case, had to be compared easily with all the data gathered in the fieldwork at Bostel, on the ship and in Norway.

REDDIT

The platform works as the "old forums": it's very easy to find out old post or subjects since its searching engine is very efficient. This is an important feature because if we aim to create communities based on relationships and not only on scattered interactions, people need to be able to go on with a discussion even for many days or weeks, sometimes months, if they feel the need to do it.

Rituality, altered states, magical practices

Reddit groups I attended are places where featurings, depictions and performances are animatedly discussed and shared. The group dedicated to band Heilung[6] is quite popular, fanbase is skilled in reading rune alphabet and norse language and the band uses runes as writings during their

[6] https://www.reddit.com/r/Heilung/ 15.119 user at december 9th 2024

performances and to entitle their album and songs. To launch their tour they created a riddle in runes with the initials of norse and supposed norse names of the main countries in program, UINLATIAISI[7]. Heilung are considered almost ministers of a new spiritualism that has begun as nordic, arctic and living history of music and sounds (they declare themselves as “Amplified History”) and have acquired a transnational attention and partecipations. The band stages a very spectacular show[8] they sell as a ritual and their audience accept this definition as if it was an expression of a real religion instead of a magnificient show accessibile paying a ticket. Some people in the fanbase use psychedelic mushrooms when they attend the concerts and this subject is also debated, sometimes even with vehemencely by the users against those who think that these habits are dangerous for health and must not be promoted. The dense spiritual and animistics featuring of Heilung seems to go beyond the local characteristics of nordic new spirituality, connected with that peculiar landscape: commenting a poll about wich is the most emotioning song, someone from Long Island, USA, tells about celebrating rituals in the street using their music, native american rituals too or seidr, norse and germanic shamanic magic, and tells that present people often get touched[9]. A very intersting discussions took place still in the Heilung subreddit with a user from South Asia living in Germany since some years: he made a digital fan art realized following those he calls something like “closed eyes vision”, listening Heilung music: figures of demons and similar creatures that he names with song titles. We talk a lot in the post for some days he tells me that the band is important because thank to them he feels a new respect for his religious roots, the band uses bells, wich are very important since they are used in temples. I ask him about the nordic “allure” of the band and he says that it can be christian too, that some featuring of their shows, like pyrodance with deer antler seems, to him, as relative of his culture. It’s intersting for me that he tells me that Heilung only can spark these emotions and considerations, all the similar music recommended by Spotify doesn’t make him feel so connected[10].

Crafts and depicting

Subjects as textile and related skills in tailoring and materials are posted in subreddit #Norse where people post selfies with their handmade historical dresses and kirtles; people discuss about tailoring techniques and fiber properties[11]. Depictions include memes too, sometimes very refined and understandable by very knowledgeable people[12].



[7] https://www.reddit.com/r/Heilung/comments/144g183/a_little_message_for_you_all/
[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PFz9FQsU8w official live video of song Anoana, 2,5millions of view at december 9th 2024
[9]https://www.reddit.com/r/Heilung/comments/11zmjnu/what_song_out_of_these_hits_you_on_a_more_deeper/
[10] https://www.reddit.com/r/Heilung/comments/107nbhn/elddansurin_closed_eye_visuals/
[11] The post is now deleted by its author
[12] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bjarni_Herj%C3%B3lfsson

Meme about Viking discovery of American coast at the beginning of X century, author unknown

Hairdressing is discussed according to style: the danish one is featured in the Bayeux Tapestry[13], cited in tv series Vikings too. About crafts discussions about accuracy of sword used in Vikings someone answers that they were symbols of power since lords went to war with a spear. Some others suggest reenactment sites, books by expert authors. A post like that can develop even about 200 answers. Tattoos are frequent and people get inked with runes inscriptions or symbols related to band or logos.

FACEBOOK

In my netnographic research on Facebook it happened that many subjects weaved together and themes became almost impossibile to be distinguished: in Midgardsblot Festival group it's not rare that people post contents related to other festivals or links to other advertising posts because pertinent or valued as interesting: promotions about concerts or videos of wishes about holydays and so on. A promotional video can receive thousands of reactions and dozens or hundreds of comments because this kind of advertized narrative displays shared values.

Rituals, anniversaries, habits, folklore

Bands, musicians and performers share their post, both personal and promotional, where they express their cultural format and genres, narrative languages, the reference background and environment, animism and the sacredness of nature, rune songs and sometimes folk medicine. All these cultural objects are tools of interpretation and interaction of the relationship human beings- nature-divination where songs can be devices for healing and awardness. Condemn to monotheism is a very frequent subject. Words like "christianity" and "religion" are synonymous of destruction and sorrow. "Spirituality" is referred to neopaganism and freely interpreted animism. An example is a post from a musician of a band[14] produced by Grimfrost, where he explains how his interest for animism came from his grandmother in creating a relationship between him and the spirits through nature. He thinks that montheism is a constricting vision people need to get free from so that the world get opened to them. A very interesting post about winter holydays has been published in Midgardsblot group on december 25th 2022 about the wild hunt[15]. In the post the conversation start from the painting Åsgårdsreien (1872), by the Romantic artist Peter Nicolai Arbo. The user explains that the title could be translated into "the Asgardian procession" or "the ride to Asgard". In the time between Christmas and new year's day, in some scandinavian and germanic areas, ther's the habit to not do the laundry: user's grandmother had this habit, the believe is that the spirits riding with Odin could get tangled up in the hanging clothes that could become their shroud. The loudest is the ride, the richest would be the the harvest. To gain the good harvest some grass need to be sacrificed to feed Sleipnir, Odin'd horse. Some of the users say that if it's not possible to avoid to o the laundry, before starting the washing machine a blot (ritual/sacrifice) is needed to avoid that the spirits remain entangled in the cloche, then the laudry can be done.

[13] https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/

[14]https://www.facebook.com/hindarfjall/posts/pfbid0QbUcwPiu64op38CEXc24btGEfjnQoQ1FtbEJ6t9ScBK1uCU2MSs N4FyzF9vWhxnhl

[15] https://www.facebook.com/groups/midgardsblot/permalink/2801580869974697/



Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Åsgårdsreien* (*The wild hunt of Odin*), 1872, Oil on canvas, 166 x 240,5 cm National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo. Image of public domain

Sami culture and traditions intersecate the viking and modern viking ones but also contemporary dailylife: in the same day of the previously cited post someone reports an article from a trustworthy newspaper about a sacrifice of a goat celebrated in a supposed cursed soccer field in northern Norway[16]. The purpose of the sacrifice was to propitiate the field since the local team never won. All the discussion get unraveled through considerations and thoughts about the meaning of a sacrifice nowadays, which could be the relationship among sami culture, vikings' and the sacrificed animals since in some situations eating the animal is a form of prayer too but at the same time a kind of wastefulness. Some others shared their reflections about how believes are still rooted and how they are performed by material devices and living animals.

Craftmanship, finding, featuring and performance.

Ships, heritage shipbuilding and seafaring are an important part of the narrative and they can be featured both as symbols of adventure and exploring and an activity that is a part of lifestyle, expecially for coastal communities. Ships can have a leading role in memes: Grimfrost company wich owns a fleet of replicas they use in posts to greet users with good wishes like a meme with men standing on a ship with a caption that says "rowing toward a new week"[17]. Rowing is part of the untangible heritage in many coastal community and it can have narrative meaning: band Amon Amarth, whose frontman is one of the founders of Grimfrost, during their concerts perform a show habit shared with their audience where all the people sit down and take the shoulder of the next person pretending to row a ship[18]. A very interesting post was published in Midgardsblot's group where an article about an archeology discovery of a grave with swords positioned vertically near some stones. Among users we wonder about the Stavanger monument, the swords in the rock and why it has been created like that. Surfing the web it seems that other discoveries like this are not easily found. We comment that this kind of depicting has always reported in legends only and now we have the evidence of the habit[19].

[16]https://www.facebook.com/groups/midgardsblot/permalink/2905780092888107/?paipv=0&eav=Afahg3NMe_ALbsK P2agQjHcW0Td0m-GXrTX_dFr9VUb4aMihhlPg-W8iZGMw6QAgA44&_rdr

[17] Lost post reference

[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxDJGw83Qy4

[19] https://www.facebook.com/groups/midgardsblot/permalink/2869228063209977/



Fritz Røed, Sverd i Fjell (Swords in the Rock), 1983, Bronze, height 10 m, Hafrsfjord, Norway. It's a commemorative monument of the Battle of Hafrsfjord in 872, when King Harald Fairhair gather the west Norwegian coast under his power. After his victory the migration of Norse people toward Iceland, and later Greenland, began. Photo by Michele Memola, august 2023.

INSTAGRAM

Runes are everywhere on Instagram: as letters they're used in bios or to write somoene's own name but also for divination: their meanings are associated to norse gods or other elements and situations. Bindrunes are runes unified accordingly to complex senses or concepts that one can want to express. Tattoo culture is also spread as well as make up of the Modern Walkyries, girls and women that love dressing in viking-like style or that live accordingly to those wich are considered viking values or LARP, live action role playing. Arctifacts, jewels, horns for drinking, furnitures, votive statuettes of norse gods, sometimes musical instruments are shown both for commercial purpose and expression of cultural belonging. Archeological evidences, expecially runestones or other carved objects, even from ages previous to vikings' are used as inspiration and sources for creating objects, tattoos, amulets, replicas. Ancient and modern viking cultures get crossed with saami's: the signs of noaidi shaman's drums[20], wich were different one from another dependly by the regions, are taken from their whole drawing and isolated for their given meaning or for a new one. Really few drums have survived when most of them were burned in 17th and 18th centuries in the time of christianization. Those which survived are preserved in various museum of Scandinavia[21].5000 years old symbols such as petroglyphs of Alta, in Norway, or other archeological sites representing reindeers, people skiing and sailing are quite spread. Social networks have allowed this lively broad revivification spreading even outer Lapland and Scandinavian areas. Drums are widely spread in nordic neofolk. Other practices are those of textile like board weaving used for belts or decorative tapes, naelbinding, a kind of "proto-crochet" without hook worked in loops or other techniques of knotting wired and yarns. On Instagram landscape and landmarks triumph. Every environment or monument, even if modern, with a potential iconic recall or direct reference to everything nordic and viking is used as storyteller of this imagery and inspiration or as set for selfies and posing pictures of enthusiasts and those I defined "viking influencers". Ships replicas both docked or sailing are part of this visual language featuring the environment as a protagonist of a cultural heritage, a recurrent word: modern vikings take pictures on the prows carved with norse motives or join sailings together rowing to share a real viking experience, very advertized from institutions or office of turistic promotion and expecially from festivals that have ships at their disposal. The landscape imagery is of course seasonal and subjcted to weather changement and astronomic events like midnight sun and polar night. These extreme space and ambience "travel" on

[20]https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378366098_THE_HISTORY_OF_LAPLAND_AND_THE_CASE_OF_THE_SAMI_NOAIDI_DRUM_FIGURES_REVERSED
[21] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%A1mi_drum

social networks at the same pace of rural spirituality, magic and witchcraft practices that are lived as nordic animism or more commonly as paganism: landscape is apparently a kind of folk stage for practices. Beltane and Valpurghisnacht in spring, Yule in winter are the most wordwidely partecipated pagan and folk holydays. It's interesting that in this context Christianity it's like if it was a taboo word, it's never named, replaced by a more general "monoteism". Nordic animism and paganism online sometimes encounter other sistems of believes like those of Asia or other continents and countries: Mexico and South America represent a great part of viking metal fanbase. Societies where animism or other form of paganism are still in use are very respected because they maintained their believes without letting them to be dismantled by monotheisms. These spiritual practices are usually studied and explained by researchers in history, archeology or anthropology who may be content creators themselves and join as lecturers at the main festivals, expecially Midgardsblot. Their work helps to validate the genuiness of some practices, traditions or believes. Museums use Instagram to engage people about displayed objects and their cultural sense and value: one of these is the Lofotr Viking Museum[22] in Borg, near Leknes at Lofoten Island that I personally visited in august 2023 during the last day of Lofotr Viking Festival. The museum is located in one of the most important archeological sites and centre of viking trades and civilisations with an accurate reconstruction of a viking long house wich is maybe the largest of all Norway. The long house, landmark of the area, is a lively museum with educational programs, is hosted by guides dressed with historical dresses and they regularly organize living history dinners with a viking menu, a performance is staged by reenacters that tell stories of viking sagas and sing songs payed with repica of ancient instruments. During the festival I had the chance to visit their reconstruction of traditional houseboats, not so different by those still in use in Norway. The festival take place in a country area by a lake where they sail with a replica of a viking ship who is almost their masterpiece and one of the main tools of communications. One of the main aim of my cruise was to compare the Lofotr Viking Festival in person to their social storytelling and with the Archeology Festival at Bostel di Rotzo. I was surprised that the reenacters at LVF werent accurate as Bostel's where anything unmatched with archeological evidences isn't admitted, women don't wear polish on nails for example. At Lofotr Vikign Festival people are very free: sunglasses, sneakers, makeup, cellphones, Coca Cola. I was surprised of that since the museum is very careful in posting quality contents about reenactments at the long house and I didn't expect one of the most important museums of Norway alloweing all this formal freedom. Another iconic museum is the Viking Ships museum in Oslo, actually closed for extension buildup wich is going to open in 2027 as Museum of Viking Era of Oslo University. They preserve some of the most famous and emblematic findings: the Oseberg Ship that has been background for one of the first neofolk and dark ambient viking music concerts by Wardruna. The museum engages people posting news about the organization of their collection of findings and, according to the objects, discussions can become very lively. It's interesting that comments are often from very tecnically expert users but also from famous musicians, actors or popular viking influencers.

CONCLUSIONS

History, traditions, spirituality, invented or restored cultures are framed by Nature and performed through music, artifacts and non tangible creativity and practices. People uses archeological findings as tangible connections with the past and heritage. When they live really far one from another they gather online creating a sort of familiarity indipendently by the geographical origin or location; meeting in person happens during festivals or concerts or living history festivals and markets. The same people can express viking and folk narratives with different socials acordingly to the best suitable way for certain apps: viking influencers and festivals promoting historical heritage, landscape and beauty of the territory can be very active on instagram since it was created for images. Facebook is the app attended for discussing topics, sharing videos, pictures and memes, external links and other pages, but keeping up with conversations is difficult because comments are gathered and reaching answers branches can be

[22] https://www.lofotr.no/en/lofotr-vikingmuseum/

impossibile if the post is very crowded. Reddit is used in the same way but less popular, people express more freely because it has less restrictions about speech rules. Social are used to share informations and news about archeological research, museums'activities, bands, concerts, markets and intangible heritage revived like craftmanship of wood or textile and lyrics related contents. Traditions are commonly shared and welcomed as habits that keep the connection with ancestors. This "new ancient cultures" are useful to promote territories using evocative narratives perceived as reliables thanks to archeological evidences, epic poetries and literature. Communities' creativity is equally spread among professionals and fans in different ways and they all contribute in creating a new culture that can be define after Fabio Dei as cyber folklore. Digital actvities influence or help choises of life and decisions like taking long flights to go to another continent to join a show. Experience in person is then digitalized and shared with those who weren't there or present but in another area of the venue. Fanbases and communities live their digital life and in person life as if they were merged together in wich has been defined by philosopher Luciano Floridi as "on life" way of life[23] (Floridi, 2015)

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You’re Not On Your Own, Kid: Online Communication Emboldens Offline Gift-Giving and Friendship

Laura K. Hoeger, Mariia Lobanova, Tina M. Lowrey

HEC Paris, Paris, France

Abstract

“So make the friendship bracelets, taste the moment and take it” are lyrics to the song “You’re on Your Own, Kid,” a track from Taylor Swift’s 2022 album release, “Midnights.” When the Eras tour kicked off, a ritual practice of creating and exchanging friendship bracelets made of plastic beads began. Some colorful, some monochromatic, some plain and others with special tokens, these bracelets feature song lyrics, album titles, or other mentions to the Swiftie fandom, ranging from the well-known (“Reputation”) to the obscure (“No, It’s Becky.”) to the inscrutable (“HGMPFBGBIGM”)

This project focuses on Taylor Swift fans, known as Swifties, as a subculture of consumption and their coping strategies to manage anxiety through online discussion, and how that affects their offline experience of fan events.

This research began in March 2024 by recruiting participants for semi-structured interviews from the subReddit r/TrueSwifties, and then developed into a netnography of this forum. A subset of the Swiftie fandom, r/TrueSwifties established itself as a group apart from the main Taylor Swift discussion subReddits as a positive and safe space for those “tired of the impossibly high (and frankly, unachievable) standards that successful women are held up to.” After gaining permission to post and study the interactions of Swifties online from the moderators (who responded “we love science”) we combed the forum for references to the friendship bracelet creation, exchange and sharing.

Netnography revealed key themes related to the friendship bracelet exchange ritual: 1. Emphasis on non-reciprocity as fans seek out those who do not have bracelets to include them in the practice, 2. Enrichment of the Swiftie lexicon, which includes in-group terminology such as “clowning” and the use of long codes and acronyms to express elements of the fandom on bracelets (ATWTVTMVFTV) 3. The collective sharing, decoding, and rating of bracelets received, often valuing creativity, misspellings and enigmatic messages over the more straightforward, and 4. How the anxiety fans experience when anticipating the bracelet exchange at Eras Tour concerts or related Swift-themed events is shared and discussed in the forum.

To further investigate this last point, two participants of the larger qualitative study agreed to perform and share mobile ethnographies of their experiences with bracelet trading upon returning to the Eras Tour for another performance. The videos, voice messages, texts, and photographs reveal that participants’ anxiety over approaching fellow fans to trade bracelets had attenuated after learning the commonality of this concern through social media. The encouragement of fellow fans through the online forums emboldened participants to initiate bracelet trading and conversation, resulting in a richer experience of the concert.

In the spirit of the Swiftie fandom and the spreading friendship-bracelet phenomenon, I propose a bracelet-making table at Netnocon so that our collective creativity may result in souvenirs from the conference and new found friendship!

Keywords: fan rituals, anxiety, consumer subculture, collective creativity, netnography

Session 21: from local dances to digital inkscapes: mapping responsibility and experience through Netnography

Because there's no "B World": The contribution of an AI-based App to Responsible Behavior

Massimiliano Ruggiero, Martina Toni, Carlo Alberto Pratesi, Giovanni Mattia

Roma Tre University - Department of Business Studies, Rome, Italy

Abstract

This study examines the effect of AI-based applications in fostering awareness and sustainable behaviors, addressing a gap in research on their effectiveness in shaping individual choices.

A netnographic analysis was conducted on 115 user reviews published in two different app stores from 2019 to 2023. Findings highlight a predominantly positive perception, emphasizing educational impact, increased awareness and involvement in responsible consumption, while identifying areas for improvement.

AI-based apps are growing, however there is a need to understand if they are able to increase awareness. This study provides insights into AI-driven behavioral change and offers recommendations to enhance app design for long-term sustainability engagement.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology has significant impacts on every sector (Alam et al., 2024). Technology integration into daily life has reshaped how individuals interact, particularly through the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Defined as a system capable of simulating human intelligence to perform tasks such as problem-solving, learning, and decision-making (Russell & Norvig, 2020), AI has been promoted as a transformative force across various domains, including the environmental sector (Verdecchia et al., 2023). In this field, applications that promote sustainable behaviors have gained attention by exploiting AI's ability to engage users and drive positive environmental and social change; additionally mobile applications are increasingly adopting gamification elements to encourage sustainable and mindful behaviors. According to Guillén et al. (2022) gamification is a powerful tool to combine education with emotional engagement, creating interactive experiences that motivate users to adopt responsible consumption practices.

This study focuses on AWorld, an italian application that encourages sustainable lifestyles and concrete actions against climate change, designed to foster sustainable behaviors through education, gamification, and personalized recommendations. Officially selected by the United Nations as a partner for its global ActNow campaign (United Nations, 2024), AWorld integrates AI-driven features with educational content and practical suggestions, enabling users to reduce their environmental footprint. Based on the statement "Change is in our hands", the AWorld app encourages individuals to embrace sustainable habits in their daily activities to contribute towards planet conservation; users' engagement is reinforced through interactive elements such as challenges, rewards, and progress tracking (AWorld, 2024).

Despite the increasing adoption of AI-driven sustainability applications, little is known about their impact on user behavior. Existing research primarily focuses on AI's technical capabilities or potential role in achieving sustainability goals at a macro level (Vinuesa et al., 2020; Oke et al., 2024). However few

studies systematically examine how AI applications influence user perceptions and whether they effectively promote long-term behavioral change. Addressing this gap, this study investigates how AI-based app, like AWorld, shape user engagement and foster responsible behavior.

The study conducts a netnography, a research method developed to analyze online consumer behavior through user-generated content (Kozinets, 1999; Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). Initially conceptualized in response to the growing use of digital platforms for social interactions (Kozinets, 1997), netnography employs ethnographic techniques to explore online consumption patterns (Kozinets, 2006). The methodological framework outlined by Kozinets (2010) has been adapted to examine how AI-driven applications increases awareness towards sustainability-related behaviors.

A total of 115 Italian user reviews from Google Play Store and Apple App Store, were collected and analyzed. The selection of app store reviews was motivated by their role as spontaneous, user-generated evaluations that provide valuable insights into user experience and perception. Data collection was conducted using AppFollow, a specialized software for aggregating and categorizing app reviews. The analysis combined sentiment, content, and semantic analysis to identify key patterns in sustainable development, user awareness, and app usability.

The findings offer an in-depth understanding of how AI-based applications contribute to sustainability-related behavior highlighting critical areas for improvement in design and functionality. By integrating sentiment analysis with others qualitative methods, this study provides a comprehensive perspective on the relationship between AI applications and responsible consumption.

Theoretical Background

In recent years, global awareness of environmental concerns has driven a significant boost toward more sustainable production and consumption practices (Vinuesa et al., 2020). Growing recognition of the environmental impacts associated with consumer choices has fueled increasing demand for sustainable products and initiatives. According to Nielsen (2021), 73% of global consumers are willing to change their consumption habits to support sustainability. This notable shift has opened new avenues for developing targeted strategies to encourage and reinforce environmentally responsible behaviors (Jiang et al., 2022). Among these strategies, the application of AI in society has gained prominence (Beyari & Garamoun, 2022).

In recent years, AI has been exploited across a wide range of environmental initiatives, including optimizing the use of natural resources, monitoring greenhouse gas emissions, and protecting ecosystems (Vinuesa et al., 2020). Moreover, AI can identify innovative solutions to address global climate challenges through machine learning techniques and predictive analytics and guide consumers toward responsible behaviors (Oke et al., 2024).

Analyzing AI’s impact on consumer behavior has become a growing area of interest for academic research and the business sector (Oke et al., 2024). The continuous advancement of AI-based technologies underscores the need to continue understanding their role in promoting sustainability-oriented behaviors.

Recent evidence suggests that sustainability-oriented behavior is strongly influenced by consumers’ perceptions of their consumption choices (Forman et al., 2023). However, it is crucial to investigate further the drivers that can encourage adopting more sustainable practices; these aspects are often examined considering technology and mobile applications which contribute to increasing the willingness to act responsibly (Shahzad et al., 2023).

In parallel, the widespread use and recognition of video games have highlighted the potential of gamification as a particularly effective strategy to foster consumer engagement and encourage long-term sustainable behaviors (Yang et al., 2023).

While several studies have demonstrated that gamification, mediated by technological awareness and hedonic motivation, can incentivize sustainable consumption behaviors (Shahzad et al., 2023), there is limited understanding of how users perceive these features and whether they contribute to sustained behavioral changes. Indeed, despite the growing attention to the role of AI in promoting sustainable behaviors few studies have systematically examined how real-world users engage with AI-based sustainability applications, what factors enhance their long-term commitment, and what limitations hinder their effectiveness.

In addition to, while existing studies have demonstrated the role of AI in optimizing sustainable practices, few have systematically examined its effectiveness in behavior modification through gamified and personalized applications. Recent research highlights AI's role in optimizing resource management reducing carbon emissions, and enhancing consumer awareness, demonstrating its potential for driving behavioral change at different levels (Vinuesa et al., 2020). Additionally, AI-powered carbon footprint analysis has been employed to support businesses in adopting more sustainable practices by providing personalized insights and actionable recommendations (Omdena, 2024). Case studies further indicate that AI-driven applications integrating gamification, adaptive learning, and real-time feedback have successfully encouraged users to engage in sustainability-related actions, reinforcing the need for comparative analyses with other sustainability-focused apps to assess the generalizability of findings (Medium, 2024).

Finally, no comprehensive framework still explains the combined influence of AI and gamification on user behavior, particularly in sustaining long-term environmental and social responsibility. Addressing these gaps requires a deeper investigation into how AI-powered applications shape consumer engagement and whether they lead to genuine, long-term adoption of sustainable behaviors rather than temporary.

AI as a driver for sustainability and its educational effectiveness: the Case of AWorld

This study focuses on AWorld, an app that integrates artificial intelligence to personalize the user experience and promote sustainable actions over the long term. By analyzying individual habits and preferences the app provides tailored recommendations and adapts educational content based on user interactions with the application.

Upon initial use, the application collects key information about the user's daily habits, including energy consumption, mobility patterns, and dietary choices, to estimate their environmental impact. The AI refines personalized suggestions through a dynamic learning process, adjusting recommendations based on completed actions. Additionally, it delivers targeted educational content, selecting relevant stories and insights aligned with the user's interests. To maintain engagement and motivation, the AI system continuously stimulates interaction by proposing challenges and missions, encouraging users to adopt and sustain environmentally responsible behaviors.

A distinctive feature of AWorld's AI is its ability to transform behavioral change into a progressive and gamified journey, guiding users toward sustainability goals through incremental daily actions and long-term challenges.

The application focuses on three key areas of sustainability, providing concrete tools to facilitate change. First, regarding reducing ecological footprints, AWorld enables users to calculate their carbon footprint using the United Nations carbon calculator, offering customized recommendations to lower individual emissions (United Nations, 2024). Second, regarding habit modification, the app introduces

daily and monthly missions that gamify eco-friendly actions allowing users to track sustainable behaviors such as reducing plastic use, optimizing energy consumption, and minimizing food waste while receiving feedback on their progress. Finally, awareness and environmental education are central to the application's strategy, with over 1,000 expert-curated educational resources covering climate change, circular economy, and energy transition. The AI system personalizes learning pathways based on user preferences, fostering targeted environmental awareness.

AWorld integrates various educational elements to foster sustainability awareness and behavioral change among users. The platform offers structured thematic learning journeys consisting of text-based content and inspirational videos covering key sustainability topics, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Upon completing each journey, users engage in interactive quizzes and surveys reinforcing their understanding and encouraging deeper reflection. Additionally, push notifications and gamification mechanics are crucial in sustaining engagement, reminding users of ongoing challenges, tracking their environmental impact, and facilitating interactions within the app's community.

Since its official launch, in 2019, the platform has engaged active users in over 190 countries, with more than 6 million climate actions recorded. Moreover, challenges initiated through the platform have contributed to planting over 27,000 trees for reforestation efforts and introducing 1.8 million bees into ecosystems to support biodiversity conservation (Lattes, 2023).

AWorld's effectiveness has been institutionally recognized, leading to its selection by the United Nations to support the ActNow campaign, reinforcing its role as an effective tool for promoting sustainable practices on a global scale.

Research Method

This study employs a netnographic approach to analyze user reviews of the AWorld italian application, to explore consumer behavior within digital environments.

The steps for conducting the netnographic analysis are detailed in Table 1.

Step	Description
First step: planning and entrée	This study analyzes how AI-powered applications influence responsible behaviors using user-generated content. Reviews from Google Play Store and Apple App Store were selected for their spontaneous, experience-based feedback. From over 700 reviews, a targeted sample of 115 Italian-language reviews (2019–2023) was analyzed to ensure depth and relevance.
Second step: data collection	Reviews were gathered via AppFollow ensuring a systematic and unbiased process. To maintain authenticity, a passive observational approach was used. The dataset was filtered by language, completeness and relevance focusing on content-rich reviews to enhance reliability.

Third step: data analysis and interpretation	A structured framework was applied, with all analyses conducted through human evaluation: (1) Review Profiling (year, rating, engagement level); (2) Sentiment Analysis (positive, neutral, negative); (3) Thematic Analysis (usability, educational impact, AI-driven behaviors); (4) Semantic Mapping to examine keyword relationships and AI's role in sustainability engagement.
Fourth step: representation and evaluation	Findings were presented through quantitative (tables, frequency distributions) and qualitative methods (semantic maps, user quotations). Key themes were structured into four macro-categories for a comprehensive interpretation.
Fifth Step: conducting ethical netnography	The study followed strict ethical standards, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Adhering to digital consumer research guidelines, insights were derived without user interaction or data manipulation.

Table 1. Steps for data analysis with the netnography method adopted (Kotzines, 2010)

The netnographic approach was chosen to better understand users' perceptions, motivations, and engagement with the application. Sentiment analysis supports the identification of the general tone of the reviews. However, key recurring topics have been identified to gain further insights, revealing relationships between core concepts expressed by users.

This methodological combination allowed for a contextualized interpretation of user opinions highlighting not only whether the app is perceived as effective, but also why and how its AI, gamification elements, and educational content contribute to behavioral change.

Research Results

The results illustrate how the application has influenced user behaviors and attitudes, different highlighting themes emerging from the reviews. Given the enormous volume of available reviews (over 700), a targeted selection was made to ensure a manageable and in-depth qualitative analysis. The dataset was filtered based on language, completeness, and relevance excluding reviews that lacked substantial textual content or provided only numerical ratings. Reviews were collected systematically using AppFollow, an online tool that aggregates and categorizes app store reviews, ensuring an unbiased and structured data collection process, and analyzed through human evaluation.

As outlined in Table 1, the analysis focused explicitly on the Italian context, with 115 Italian-language reviews selected and analyzed from the two major digital platforms: Apple Store (34 reviews) and Google Play Store (81 reviews). This selection was motivated by AWorld being an Italian-developed application, making the Italian user base particularly relevant for understanding engagement dynamics and behavioral adoption.

Moreover, this first-stage analysis lays the groundwork for a future, more comprehensive study, which could involve direct user interaction and extend the dataset to include the entire set of 700+ reviews across different languages and regions.

The Italian reviews analyzed span from 2019, the year the application was launched, to 2023. A significant increase in the frequency of reviews is observed between 2020 and 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent post-pandemic period. This increase may reflect a rise in awareness of environmental and social issues that emerged in the global emergency caused by the pandemic. Indeed, 102 reviews (88.7%) were recorded between 2020 and 2022.

Year of publication	Number of reviews	Frequency
2019	2	1,7%
2020	22	19,1%
2021	53	46,1%
2022	27	23,5%
2023	11	9,6%
Total	**115**	**100%**

Table2. Publication’s year of reviews

The app's rating ranges from 1 to 5 stars. These ratings were classified into critical (1 to 3 stars) and favourable (4 and 5 stars) following a classification criterion commonly used on other review platforms. The analysis revealed a clear predominance of favourable reviews (101 reviews) compared to critical reviews, which accounted for only 14 reviews. These findings were subsequently compared with the results obtained from the Sentiment Analysis.

Rating	Number of reviews	Frequency
1 star	8	7%
2 stars	1	0,9%
3 stars	5	4,3%
4 stars	19	16,5%
5 stars	82	71,3%

Total	**115**	**100%**

Table 3. Rating's reviews

Considering the number of 'like' a total of 196 interactions were recorded across various reviews. Among the 115 reviews analyzed, 71 did not receive 'like' (no interactions), while the remaining reviews received varying levels of interaction, ranging from 1 to 28 likes.

Here following the most appreciated reviews are illustrated. These user reviews provide direct evidence of how AWorld's AI-driven recommendations influence individual behaviors, guiding users toward sustainable practices. These testimonies highlight the effectiveness of AI in personalizing content, fostering engagement, and driving people towards long-term behavioral change. In fact, these reviews received a total of 10 or more likes:

- **User 1 (10 Likes):** "*I really like this app: useful, simple, intuitive, and well-structured. One of the few apps for which I don't disable push notifications :) However, I would love to add more habits beyond those currently listed!*";
- **User 2 (11 Likes):** "*A very well-made and truly useful app. Congratulations, especially for including vegetarian meals among the useful features, considering the often overlooked social and environmental impact of a meat-heavy diet*";
- **User 3 (13 Likes):** "*I think this is the only app worth spending a few extra minutes on my phone for. Nice graphics and up-to-date information really stimulate and lead to a change in how we live and coexist on this planet*";
- **User 4 (14 Likes):** "*I really appreciate how habits are implemented; although there are only a few (I hope more will be added), along with the points system mechanism, they serve as a positive 'push' that can encourage users to become more aware of the social and environmental impact of their lifestyle. In this regard, I believe the brief explanation provided works very well, and adding a link for further information was an excellent idea. I also find the graphical interface pleasant and the app quite smooth to use. I haven't explored the other sections enough to form an opinion, but what I've seen so far has already impressed me greatly. Great job*";
- **User 5 (25 Likes):** "*A useful app to bring many closer to the topic of climate change. Interactive and encouraging, it pushes users to compete with themselves and rediscover how small actions can make a difference without completely disrupting their habits. It would be great if there were a program for younger audiences as well, to start raising awareness on this topic from an early age*";
- **User 6 (28 Likes):** "*After four months of daily use, I have completed everything the app offers, and for at least two months, no new habits have been added that can be implemented daily. Once you've read the brief daily extract and reached level 6, the app doesn't offer anything new. Visually stunning, it's useful for both adults and children to learn more about sustainability and for anyone who needs to see concretely how much our actions matter*".

The reviews could be categorized as positive, negative or neutral. However neutral reviews encompassed a mix of ratings ranging from 1 to 5-stars. These neutral reviews often reflected feedback from users who found the application useful but encountered technical issues or offered suggestions for improvement.

It is worth noting that among the 21 neutral and negative reviews, primarily focused on software issues and improvement suggestions 20 were published between 2020 and 2021, with only one review appearing in 2023. This observation may suggest that, over the past three years, the company has effectively addressed the concerns of initially dissatisfied users thereby enhancing the overall experience.

All reviews have been classified into four categories based on their content:

1. **"*Overall App Impressions*"**: reviews discussing the application in general terms without referring to specific features or elements. These reviews are mainly associated with positive reviews. Examples:
    - **User 13:** "*Well-made app, easy to use, and rich in useful content*";
    - **User 14:** "*Intuitive and engaging app*";
    - **User 15:** "*Very well-designed, with concise yet engaging content*";
    - **User 16:** "*Pleasant and functional graphics that help improve habits! Available in Italian. Highly recommended*";
    - **User 17:** "*Truly wonderful*".
2. **"*Social and Environmental Impacts*"**: reviews emphasizing the app's potential to positively influence individuals and, consequently, the environment. They are mainly linked to positive reviews. Examples:
    - **User 18:** "*Together to save the planet! If everyone in the world made a small daily gesture for the environment, we could achieve great milestones, and AWorld helps us do that!*";
    - **User 19:** "*It gives you courage, you don't abandon the app. There's a growth path that leads you to love and respect environment*";
    - **User 20:** "*Encourages reflection, with many interesting topics. Valid suggestions for personal actions to reduce social and environmental impacts*";
    - **User 21:** "*Five stars simply because I learned about the 'Navy shower' technique through the app*!";
    - **User 22:** "*Interesting and motivating. Small actions can make us better, stop harming the planet, and feel more at peace*".
3. **"*Suggestions for Improving Responsible Behavior*"**: users offer recommendations or expressed desires for additional features or improvements to the app. These reviews are mainly associated with neutral reviews. Examples:
    - **User 23:** "*Well-made, pleasant app with easy and quick explanations of complex issues. I would happily explore more content. A widget for quick activity marking or app access would be great*!";
    - **User 24:** "*Beautiful app. It would be nice to add more daily sustainable habits! For example, reusing paper or using a broom instead of a vacuum cleaner*";
    - **User 25:** "*Stimulating ideas, but more could be added*";
    - **User 26:** "*Nice app; there are a couple of flaws to fix to make its message more effective, but it's clear that a lot of good work went into it*!";
    - **User 27:** "*I really like this app because it informs and motivates you to do more for the planet and our existence. I just wish more habits could be added; there are many useful actions beyond those currently included*".
4. **"*Software Issues*"**: reviews highlighting technical problems or malfunctions that hindered the app functionality. These reviews are mainly associated with negative reviews. Examples:
    - **User 28:** "*I tried installing it, but it keeps crashing, and the 'invite friends' function doesn't work. If I manage to log back in, I'll delete my account*";
    - **User 29:** "*I can't complete Episode 2. The file to read doesn't load, and after watching the video, clicking 'continue' shows a completely blank screen*";
    - **User 30:** "*I can't register. Despite the app suggesting a username, I get the message 'Oh no! Something went wrong, 1 validation error detected: value at username failed to satisfy constraint,' etc*.";
    - **User 31:** "*The graphics are poor. When I try to add a mate, it says 'unavailable,' whatever that means*";
    - **User 32:** "*Fantastic and truly useful for understanding one's impact on the world. I'm not giving five stars only because there are bugs in reading articles where text gets cut off. I hope this issue will be resolved in the future*".

This categorization provided a structured framework to analyze user perceptions and identify key areas of strength and weakness.

The analysis revealed that positive reviews primarily correspond particularly to the categories of "Overall App Impressions", "Suggestions for Improving Responsible Behavior", and "Social and Environmental Impacts", whereas negative and neutral reviews are concentrated in "Software Issues", reflecting technical challenges.

Overall, the app is well-received, but technical issues remain an area for improvement.

Analyzing the content of user reviews allowed for extracting significant elements, representing the most recurring themes expressed by users about the application and responsible behavior. A visual overview allows to understand better the primary users' impressions and their relationship with the application. The words associated the most with app are: "Useful", "Planet Protection", "Environmental Impacts", "Responsible Behavior", "Education", "Recommended", "Sustainability", "Interesting", "User Friendly", "Intuitive", "Inspiration" and "Future". A visual semantic map was created to explore the effects of the app adoption to people educational growth.

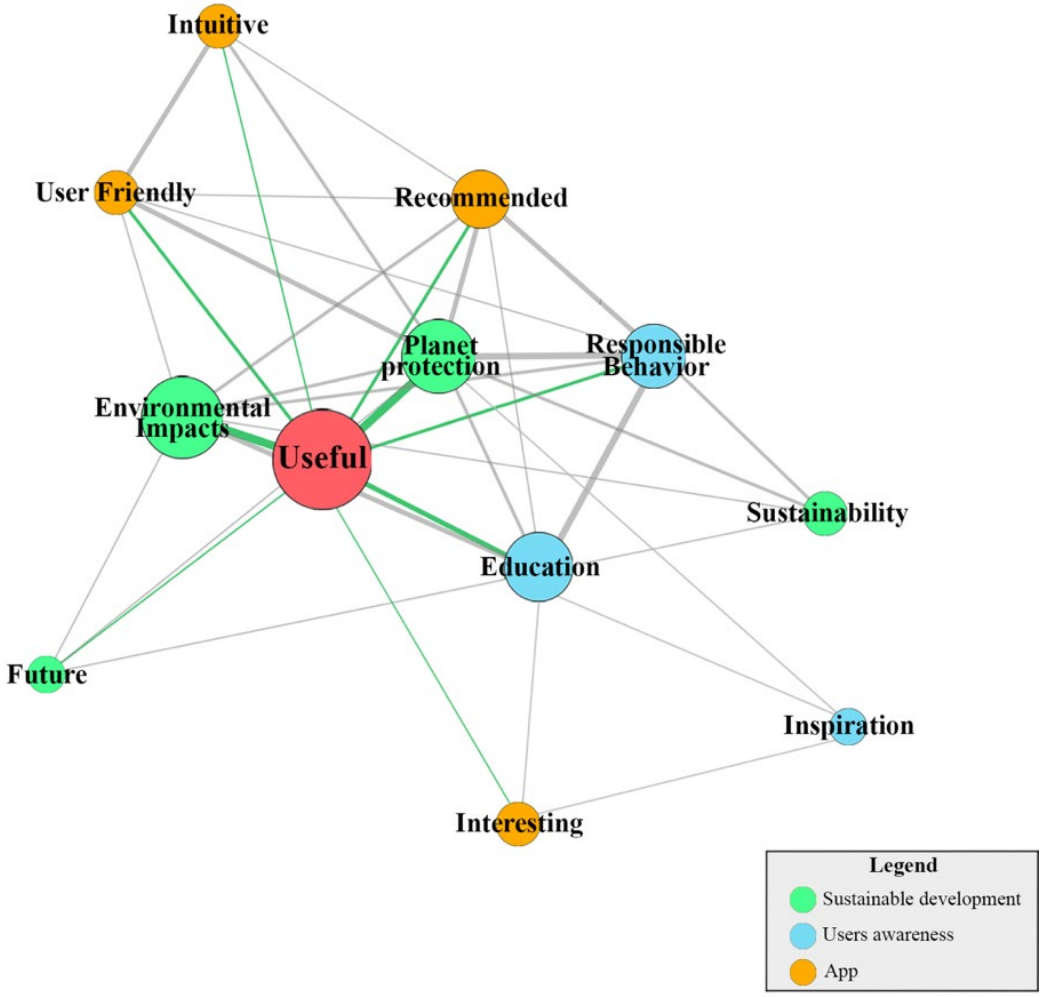


Figure 1. Semantic co-occurrence map of users' keywords

"Useful" is the central node, with numerous connections to other terms. It suggests that usefulness is perceived as a fundamental aspect of the user experience serving as a focal point for related themes. The green connections (thicker lines) highlight the links between "Useful" and other elements such as "Planet Protection", "Environmental Impacts", and "Education", indicating a strong association between the perception of usefulness and values related to sustainability and environmental awareness. These links suggest that the application is perceived not only as a practical tool but also as a means to promote informed “Responsible Behavior” for the benefit of the environment. "Sustainability," "User Friendly", and "Recommended" are distributed around the central nodes, emphasizing the importance of accessibility and user approval. Terms like "Inspiration" and "Future", while less frequent and more peripheral within the network, add a value-driven and forward-looking dimension to the semantic system, indicating that the application inspires reflections on long-term changes.

Finally, the map highlights three main clusters, each associated with a color and a specific thematic area:

- **Green Cluster - "*Sustainable Development*"**: includes comments that excite the app's environmental impact and its role in promoting sustainable behaviors, and protect the planet;
- **Blue Cluster - "*Users Awareness*"**: comprises enthusiastic comments related to the app ability in fostering responsible actions through education and increasing awareness;
- **Orange Cluster - "*App*"**: emphasizes the importance of design and accessibility contributing to the understanding of the user experience and overall effectiveness, as well as identifying areas for internal improvements.

The emphasis on these themes confirms the consistency between user perceptions and the strategic positioning of the application.

Conclusions

The analysis of user reviews highlights the significant potential of Artificial Intelligence as a tool to promote education on environmental and social responsibility. The app is considered useful from different perspectives: by suggesting an ad-hoc personal path based on users' habits, it fosters education and responsible behavior informing about sustainability, and it contributes to protect the planet and reduce environmental impacts.

Among the reviews many users explicitly reported behavioral changes and modifications in their daily habits as a direct effect of the app's adoption, indicating its practical influence on sustainability-oriented decision-making. The findings of this study indicate that AI-driven personalization plays a crucial role in fostering sustainable behaviors. The user reviews analyzed in this research provide direct evidence of the users' perceptions of how AI influences decision-making confirming that tailored recommendations and adaptive learning experiences can effectively drive behavior change.

However, some areas for improvement also emerged, particularly concerning technical issues and the need to expand functionalities and content to sustain user interest over the long term, as evidenced by negative and neutral sentiments. In this regard, human input could help monitoring sustainable behaviors to include further relevant suggestions for responsible citizens.

In terms of limitations, this study relies exclusively on qualitative user feedback, providing insights into perceived effectiveness rather than direct behavioral tracking. Moreover, the diversity of global user experiences needs to be considered by including different nationalities. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of users' actual behaviors outside the digital environment could be included to measure the app's impact on behavioral change.

Future research could explore cultural and socioeconomic differences related to app perception and usage. Additionally integrating the netnographic analysis with longitudinal studies, such as surveys and interviews, could help to assess the actual behavioral changes inspired by the app. Finally, a comparative analysis with similar applications could offer further insights into optimizing the design and functionalities of digital tools to promote sustainability.

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Exploring the rich depths of netnography in e-tourism research

Imane Zarrouk, Soufiane Aguida

Fless Souissi, Mohammed V University of Rabat, Rabat, Morocco

Abstract

Over the past decade, netnography has gained popularity among e-tourism researchers as a method to explore the cultural dimensions of social media. However, despite its growing use, its potential remains underutilized, as big data approaches continue to dominate the analysis of social media content in tourism research. These quantitative methods often fail to capture the humanistic and context-rich insights that netnography can offer.

Netnography is a flexible and qualitative research approach designed to study social media interactions in a way that emphasizes the cultural intricacies of users' experiences. Unlike big data, which focuses on vast amounts of statistical information, netnography delves deeper into the meaning behind online interactions, making it a valuable tool for understanding complex phenomena in e-tourism. This article introduces the methodology of netnography and discusses how it contrasts with the more data-heavy approaches typically used to analyze social media in the field.

The article first outlines the rigorous processes involved in conducting netnographic research. It highlights how this method allows researchers to maintain a human-centered focus, providing rich and contextual insights that go beyond numbers. By doing so, netnography helps in understanding how people engage with travel and tourism-related content on social media, capturing not only what users share but also why and how they share it.

Following this introduction, the article explores the differences between netnography and big data analysis. Big data, with its emphasis on large-scale patterns and trends, tends to overlook the personal, emotional, and cultural aspects of online content. Netnography, in contrast, offers a more holistic view, taking into account the lived experiences of users and the meanings they attach to their interactions within online communities. This is illustrated in Figure 1: Comparison between Netnography and Big Data Methods in E-Tourism Research. The figure contrasts the two approaches, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses in the context of social media analysis for e-tourism research.

Description: This diagram illustrates the key differences between netnography and traditional big data approaches used to analyze social media in e-tourism research. It uses a comparative table to show how netnography emphasizes qualitative, context-rich insights, while big data focuses on statistical patterns and trends. The diagram highlights where these methods diverge and where they can complement each other in e-tourism research.

Through a series of case studies and examples, the article illustrates the practical applications of netnography in e-tourism research. It shows how this approach can be used to examine key topics such as electronic word-of-mouth, online reviews, virtual communities, selfies, and other user-generated content related to travel and tourism. For example, netnography can provide valuable insights into how tourists perceive and talk about their experiences in online forums, and how these discussions shape the broader e-tourism landscape.

The article highlights netnography's value in uncovering online travel community dynamics beyond big data insights. It emphasizes combining qualitative netnography with quantitative big data analysis for a comprehensive understanding of social media's impact on e-tourism, focusing on cultural, emotional, and human aspects often missed by data-driven methods.

Flor Ribeirinha: From folklore group to creativity, inclusion and economic impact

Maria Augusta Ribeiro

UNIVAG, Cuiaba, Brazil

Abstract

The Flor Ribeirinha Group, based in São Gonçalo, Mato Grosso, Brazil, is a unique example of creativity and cultural leadership in Brazil. Internationally recognized for its work in valuing local traditions, the group combines artistic expressions, intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and digital engagement with the goal of generating income by expanding its cultural shows. The group manages to propagate the history of riverside ancestors with its music, dance and musical instruments.

Creativity is a central element in Flor Ribeirinha's activities, manifested in the preservation and reinvention of traditional cultural expressions, such as the siriri and the cururu. These artistic expressions have existed in the area since the 18th century, mixing traditions of indigenous, European and African peoples. That is why the entire community has a degree of kinship and their artistic demonstrations are constantly adapted to new formats, without losing their authenticity.

Since 1995, the creative leadership of Domingas Leonor, the group's founder, has been fundamental in this process, as she combines ancestral knowledge with artistic innovation, ensuring that the presentations stand out at both national and international festivals. Flor Ribeirinha is in its third generation to lead the company.

Flor Ribeirinha's creativity not only keeps cultural traditions alive, but also transforms these manifestations into tools for education and awareness. The inclusion of young people from the community in dance, music and craft workshops shows how the group's leadership promotes cultural continuity while encouraging young people to connect with their roots.

Flor Ribeirinha has also shown positive results in using social media to promote its art and attract new viewers. However, the biggest problem is the lack of financial resources for its artistic productions. Netnography research seeks to solve this problem by understanding consumer behavior on social media, and the data generated will help the group's digital strategies by strengthening connections with members and other admirers of Brazilian culture.

Using netnography, we mapped cultural artifacts like: ethnicity, crafts, music, dance, musical instruments, clothing, and regional symbols of Flor Ribeirinha on Instagram, verifying how this entire cultural infrastructure can generate ongoing financial resources for the group, since there are few public policies in Brazil that encourage riverside culture.

The relevance of Flor Ribeirinha transcends culture. The company's theme phrase, "my soul sings the joy of living," is a living testament to how cultural leadership can promote significant change in vulnerable communities, ensuring that traditions remain alive while generating inclusion and income for future generations.

Keywords: Flor Ribeirinha, Creativity, Identity

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Reimagining the Art of Personal Storytelling Through Interactive Multimedia Tattoos

Stephanie Weber

Independent scholar, Vienna, Austria

Abstract

In the digital age, tattoos evolved from static symbols into interactive, multimedia forms of storytelling that bridge the physical and digital realms. These tattoos challenge traditional tattoo art by transforming the body into a dynamic canvas for narrative engagement. I explore how projects like Shelley Jackson’s *Skin*, Balazs Bercsenyi and Rémy Barbeoch’s motion tattoos, and *Skin Motion*’s soundwave tattoos push the boundaries of conventional tattooing. These new tattoo forms engage in a complex process of rewriting and rereading, akin to hypertextual narratives. Unlike classic tattoos, which are typically singular and static markers on the body, these tattoos create multilayered, nonlinear narratives that extend beyond the individual wearer. They are realized across multiple bodies and require inter- and multimedia tools—such as digital archives, project websites, apps, and scannable interfaces—to fully reveal their narrative. The full story is accessible only when more than one perceptual mode is applied, creating an interactive, nonlinear experience.

Jackson’s *Skin* project involves tattooing individual words onto volunteers, creating a collective narrative that is partially visible on the body. Additional elements of the story become accessible through online photographs of the tattoos, accompanied by “footnotes”—personal anecdotes that provide context. This fragmented, nonlinear narrative mirrors hypertextual stories, where multiple paths and interpretations unfold based on how the viewer engages with the text. The project shows how tattoos can be a digital storytelling medium that extends beyond the body, relying on online interaction and digital archives. Bercsenyi and Barbeoch’s motion tattoos add complexity, revealing their full narrative only through specific interactions, such as viewing the design in sequence or using an app or a plastic grid. These tattoos transform from static to dynamic, evolving texts that require tools to unlock their meaning. This shift challenges traditional tattooing practices, turning tattoos into immersive, multimedia experiences that engage viewers in interactive ways. *Skin Motion* takes this idea further by converting audio files into tattooable soundwave stencils, transforming tattoos into digital artifacts. The tattoo’s meaning is unlocked through a mobile app, which plays back the audio linked to the design. In this project, tattoos are no longer simply physical marks; they become multimedia texts that rely on technology, creating an ongoing, interactive relationship between the wearer, the audience, and a digital archive.

These projects highlight how multimedia tattoos construct collective memory, turning the body into an interactive archive. Viewed through the digital lens, these tattoos challenge traditional views of memory-making, storytelling, and self-expression at the intersection of physical and virtual worlds and resemble hypertextual narratives—layered, nonlinear, and open to constant reinterpretation. They blur the lines between individual and collective creativity and between physical and digital realms, encouraging new modes of storytelling that extend beyond the individual into a shared, interconnected narrative. Finally, I aim to foster a discussion on the potential future of multimedia tattooing, exploring how emerging

technocultural developments could further reshape our understanding of memory, storytelling, art, and self-expression in the digital age.

Keywords: Tattoos, virtual reality, cyberspace, multimedia body art

A Theory of Goals as Practices

Thuy Luyen[1], Haseeb Shabbir[2], Hongfei Liu[3], Paurav Shukla[3], Nina Michaelidou[4]

[1]The University of Sunderland, Sunderland, United Kingdom. [2]Bayes Business School, London, United Kingdom. [3]Southampton Business School, Southampton, United Kingdom. [4]Loughborough Business School, Loughborough, United Kingdom

Abstract

Consumers are often driven by goals, engaging in a nexus of practices—routinized behaviors (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). These goals vary across multiple dimensions, such as in specificity from specific to abstract, autonomy from controlled to autonomous (Zhang et al. 2011). These dimensions often interact, influencing goal pursuit and outcomes (Austin and Vancouver 1996). We conceptualize goal pursuit as engagement in a nexus of practices. Multiple goal dimensions therefore can interact and evolve, influencing Consumer Engagement in Practices (CEPs).

Research has mostly approached goal dimensions as non-interactive (Milyavskaya et al. 2015). When another stream of research investigates their interaction, we do not know how goal dimensions interact and evolve, influencing CEPs over individuals and time.

To address the gap, we ask: how do goal dimensions interact and drive CEPs? and how do consumers manage these interactions when their CEPs evolve? These questions are approached through practice theory (Schatzki 1996) and netnography (Kozinets 2002). We ethically observed and participated in three online communities which host large user-generated posts and comments about shared experiences in practice engagement toward goal dimensional pursuit. Our netnographic findings are supplemented by in-depth interviews. We focus on goal autonomy and goal specificity in the context of complex and prolonged goals (e.g. weight loss). In this context, multiple goal dimensions may co-exist and interact in ways that are more intricate than traditional approaches have assumed (Milyavskaya et al. 2015) and are exceptionally challenging for success over time (Guo et al. 2013; Huang 2018).

Our findings reveal ‘a theory of goals as practices’, explaining how goal dimensions dilute and/or complement each other in driving CEPs, and how such interactions can be managed when CEPs evolves. Our theory offers several contributions. First, we advance goal dimensionality literature, uncovering the dynamic (interactive and transformative) nature within and across goal dimensions in driving CEPs. For instance, we demonstrate how controlled practice engagement may be diluted by specific one and vice versa, shaping vulnerable practice engagement pathways. However, controlled practice engagement may evolve to or integrate with autonomous one, harmonizing/complementing with specific one, consequently shaping more habituated practice engagement pathways. Our findings show that a practice theory perspective can shed new insights into how goal dimensions evolve or harm together over time within the engagement in socially constructed practices, creating a more realistic representation of goals pursuit in everyday life (Neil et al. 2017).

Second, we reveal how ambivalence intensity—varying degrees of the simultaneously positive and negative valance over time shapes consumer engagement in practices, bridging the dynamic effects of goal dimensions on CEPs. Our approach expands previous consumer-based practice studies which

rely on a negative and uni-dimensional valence (Thomas and Epp, 2019), and those that neglect the temporal aspects of consumer ambivalence (Halkier 2001).

Third, we add insights into transformability—constant adjustments within and across practice engagement pathways (e.g. Luyen et al. 2021). We identify that variations in ambivalent intensity can prompt consumers to activate reconfigurations within or across goal dimensions, a shift to another pathway of practice engagement.

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Session 22: Religion and spirituality in Netnographic imaginaries

The Dude abides: Suffering, healing and… *"f*ck it, Dude, let's go bowling"*

Gregorio Fuschillo, Jagannath Sanyal

Kedge Business School, Marseille, France

Abstract

This exploratory study contributes to the growing debate on the religionization of the market (Appau, 2021). Moving beyond the traditional view that sees the market in opposition to religion (McAlexander et al., 2014), the religionization of the market theorizes a silent takeover of the market by religion. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in non-Western contexts "where religion has never been separated from other spheres of life" (Appau, 2021: 195). Building on this ongoing discussion (Jafari et al., 2023), our study examines a unique case where religion and the marketplace intersect in an unexpected and creative manner: Dudeism and The Church of the Latter-Day Dude. Dudeism is inspired by the cult movie *The Big Lebowski* and its central character Jeff "The Dude" Lebowski. Using a netnographic approach (Kozinets and Gambetti, 2021), we analyzed 1,353 posts-ongoing on dudeism.com to investigate this phenomenon.

Preliminary findings reveal that consumers embrace Dudeism as a religion that allows them to: 1) reorder their life ("*Saw The Big Lebowski yesterday man, I feel the rugs really binding me together but I need to take this inner change easy man"*); 2) cease suffering *("There is something beautiful about not taking things to seariously. Withdrawling from the pressures of society. And just going with the flow of life. Not getting overwhelmed."*); 3) extinguish the ego *("preaches non-preachiness, practices as little as possible" that's why i love Dudeism"*); 4) communing with the divine (*"I agree to abide to the fullest, so help me Dude, amen"*).

These insights illustrate how the marketplace and religion can intertwine in innovative ways. While Dudeism originates in a Western context, it demonstrates that consumers increasingly seek alternative forms of religiosity to navigate their relationship with themselves and others.

Previous research highlights how the marketplace serves as a conduit for religious and spiritual meanings by offering therapeutic experiences (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Higgins and Hamilton, 2019). In contrast, Dudeism turns the marketplace into a religious resource that allows individuals to craft their own spiritual practices and beliefs, in a time when institutional religions seem to resonate less with consumers' well-being needs.

Finally, Dudeism shows how... *"Sorry, I lost my train of thought here."*

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Mourning, mystifying, and memorializing: the consumption of pets' death on digital platforms

Rossella C. Gambetti[1], Robert V. Kozinets[2], Ulrike Gretzel[2]

[1]Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy. [2]University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

Abstract

In our contemporary technoculture, what do pet owners experience when their pet dies? How do humans, pets, brands and digital platforms interact in the representation of pets' death? We explore these questions through a netnography focused on the digital world of contemporary pet bereavement discourses, imagers, texts, and services.

In the Western world, almost everyone who has lost their pet is familiar with the vernacular metaphor of the Rainbow Bridge: an imaginary bridge connected to heaven, where beloved pets go after death to wait for the arrival of their human companions. Online, the use of the Rainbow Bridge narrative and metaphors have become ubiquitous, employed by pet owners, influencers and a booming "pet loss industry". Pet loss memorial groups that come together online to mourn pets, websites offering thematic merchandise including memorial urns, customized obituary poems and passed pets' portraits, influencers who describe themselves as "certified pet loss grief counsellors", and commemorative social media pages dedicated to passed pets or dead pet influencers all rely on the Rainbow Bridge metaphor to mourn and memorialize.

Anthropological studies on animals' death and afterlives highlight vernacular ontologies (Magliocco, 2018) that contrast with dominant Western naturalist views (Descola, 2013; Bird-David, 1999). These perspectives attribute spiritual personhood to animals, imagining them as possessing a spiritual existence that continues after death and allows interaction with humans. As companion animals are increasingly anthropomorphized, regarded as family members (Holbrook & Woodside, 2008; Downey & Ellis, 2008), and represented through identities like "fur babies" (Maddox, 2021; Ngai, 2022), they are also envisioned as having afterlives, reflecting a growing belief in the reality of their spiritual interiority.

Building on this work, we employ netnography (Kozinets, 2020) to get a cultural understanding of the phenomenon. Our work explores the Rainbow Bridge pet bereavement metaphor and its related constellation of narratives, conversations and artistic visual representations spanning major digital platforms. Initial findings suggest that in their imaginary afterlives, pets continue to play an affective and social role deeply connecting them to their human families. A vivid commercial imaginary is crafted and intensified through digital platforms. It blends artwork depicting pets' heaven as a colorful fantasy world crowded with whimsical domestic and wild animals, with embodied creative depictions of human Rainbow Bridge custodians, with the production of rich cultural contents (e.g., emotional support videos, fanciful commemorative objects, themed Airbnbs, customized cryptocurrencies, funny memes, emotional fan art and tattoos) that perpetuate the lives of passed pets. This imaginary is masterfully marketized as a coping device to overcome the loss, memorialize pets, connect with each other and

even encourage social advocacy. In this imaginary, the soul of lost pets is variously mystified and reimbodied in angelic forms and rainbow colors that turn the negative energy of grief into a creative force of collective sharing and self-expression, which further fuels the pet loss consumption.

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From secrecy to visibility: What social media affordances do to witchcraft

Zanette Maria Carolina[1], Rinallo Diego[2], Laetitia Mimoun[3], Robert V. Kozinets[4]

[1]Neoma Business School, Paris, France. [2]emlyon business school, Lyon, France. [3]ESCP Business School, Paris, France. [4]University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

Abstract

Social media affordances have disrupted various consumption practices, reshaping activism (Kozinets et al. 2021), fashion trend creation (Dolbec and Fischer 2015), and collaborative behaviors such as couch surfing (Scaraboto & Figueiredo 2022). But what happens when these affordances intersect with traditions steeped in secrecy, esoteric rituals, and stigmatization? This study investigates the phenomenon of "online witches" (Renser and Tiidenberg, 2020; Rinallo et al. 2023) by examining the interplay between social media and witchcraft, here understood as a set of spiritual practices rooted in the myth of the witch (Zanette et al., 2024; Hutton 2017; James et al. 2023). Positive representations of witchcraft emerged in 1950s in the British Isles with Wicca, a neopagan religion emphasizing nature, rituals and witchcraft practices, which has expanded internationally intertwining with women’s and queer spiritualities. While traditional witch communities have historically resisted commercialization (Rinallo et al. 2016), younger generations of witches are embracing platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Reddit, which foster new forms of engagement and interact with broader movements such as intersectional

feminism (Zanette et al. 2023). We therefore ask: How do social media affordances reshape witchcraft practices? Can they enable deeper integration with commercial culture?

To address these questions, we conducted a longitudinal in-person ethnography and netnography of #witchesofinstagram, #witchtok, and r/witchcraft, supplemented by interviews with self-identified witches and our research team's immersion journals documenting platform-specific affordances. Our findings reveal three key insights: (1) exposure to witch-identifying content creators significantly influences users' self-identification as witches; (2) the anonymity valued in earlier online spaces (e.g. newsgroups and Facebook), has given way to public visibility via person-branding and commercial content creation; (3) solitary witchcraft practices are being replaced by unprecedented online interactions, transcending geographical boundaries and offering alternatives to communal in real life practice in traditional covens.

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Confession and Catharsis: A Study of Symbolism and Self-Exploration in Digital and Tangible Spaces

Giada Mattias, Giacomo Bagna

University of Torino, Torino, Italy

Abstract

In digital anthropology, the exploration of online communities has become increasingly significant, particularly in understanding how individuals express and navigate their innermost thoughts and emotions. This study delves into the subreddit r/confession, where users engage in a digital confession akin to the traditional Christian confessional to explore the depths of their hidden selves. Researchers embarked on an exploratory netnography (see e.g. Kozinets and Gretzel 2024) to comprehend how the symbolic act of confession within this online space facilitates a sense of liberation and introspection among its members.

While prior netnographic research has examined online consumer confessions (e.g., Fyrberg-Yngfalk et al., 2013), this work advances the field by integrating a novel art-based research protocol with netnography. The research investigates how the symbolic act of confession in digital and physical spaces fosters introspection and emotional relief.

The first phase involved a netnographic analysis (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024) of posts and comments on r/confession, focusing on guilt, shame, relief, and transformation themes. Data were collected over ten months from TikTok, Reddit, and Facebook, providing a longitudinal perspective on confession dynamics. The anonymity afforded by these platforms encouraged users to share deeply personal narratives, often inaccessible in offline contexts. This digital space functioned as both a repository for confessions and a community where empathy, support, and even absolution were exchanged, mirroring the traditional confessional's role in fostering spiritual and emotional catharsis.

Building on these insights, the researchers adopted an art-based approach (Greenwood, 2019) to deepen understanding of confession dynamics. A physical installation resembling a Christian confessional was created, equipped with a recorder and prompts for participants to respond anonymously. This setup replicated the privacy of online confession while introducing a tangible, symbolic element. Participants reported that the physicality of the space enhanced their sense of safety and privacy, leading to deeper self-reflection compared to the digital environment. The absence of direct human interaction further facilitated unfiltered expression.

The study's key contribution lies in its methodological innovation—the combination of netnography with an artistically inspired physical device. This approach revealed how symbolic elements can amplify the depth of confessions and highlighted the interplay between digital anonymity and embodied experiences in fostering introspection.

By integrating netnography with art-based research, this study offers new perspectives on the psychological and social dimensions of confession in online and offline contexts. It underscores the potential for combining methodologies to explore complex emotional behaviors and contributes to broader discussions on vulnerability, community, and self-expression in digital anthropology.

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Session 23: Building better worlds

Using social media to build a lifestyle community. The case of tourism entrepreneurs

Claire Grellier Fouillet[1,2], Anne Gombault[1], Dominique Bourgeon Renault[2]

[1]KEDGE Business School, Bordeaux, France. [2]Université de Bourgogne, Dijon, France

Abstract

Although tourism is valued by economic and political players for its growth potential, it is often criticized for its harmful impact on the environment. The COVID pandemic has accentuated this need for innovation to develop sustainable tourism. Entrepreneurs are drivers for change. The aim of this research is to understand the role of innovative entrepreneurs in this evolution of the sector. One of the sub-questions of this research is to understand the online behavior of these entrepreneurs and their relationship with their lifestyle community.

The tourism sector makes particular use of information and communication technologies to innovate (Buhalis, 2019). Research on e-tourism focuses on travelers' use of social networks, but less on the behavior of online tourism entrepreneurs. Most tourism entrepreneurs are lifestyle entrepreneurs. They seek a balance between their passion and their work through entrepreneurship (Ivanycheva et al., 2023). Its main influence applies to enhancing the tourism experience, as an expert consumer, through niche innovations.

A netnography study of twenty French entrepreneurs and their businesses' communication was carried out on social media from 2019 to 2023 (Kozinets, 2020). Care was taken to study the images published and the interactions between the entrepreneur and his community. A complementary ethnographic study was also done involving interviews and observation.

The results show a duality in the behavior of online entrepreneurs. For some, this behavior corresponds to a perfect knowledge of digital marketing codes, including storytelling and personal branding. For others, they don't apply good communication practices, which is hurting their company's image and, ultimately, its development. Furthermore, they use social networks to position their new offer with images of everyday tourism, far from the beaches and exoticism of the usual photos. To finish, entrepreneurs' involvement on social networks is also a strong indicator that they are building a lifestyle community around themselves. One of the aspirations of these entrepreneurs is to make a living from their lifestyle, but also to share it. They are developing a sustainable and creative tourism that they want to spread for a transmodern society. Technology enables them to share their values and virtually build the community that makes their company so successful.

This research shows that thanks to digital technologies, lifestyle entrepreneurs can build glocal communities that go beyond niche markets. This sharing, combined with the experience of a sustainable and creative tourism offer, can contribute to the development of transmodern tourism.

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Innovative Approaches in Educational Leadership: Using Netnography and Visual Analysis to Explore Principals' Professional Identity in a Socially Mediated World.

Erika Nelson

University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Abstract

What happens when school leadership moves from the principal's office to the public court of social media? As K-12 principals navigate an increasingly digital world, many find that their role is no longer defined solely by their understanding of instructional leadership but by their ability to manage crises, navigate public scrutiny, and respond to shifting community expectations. This manuscript presents findings from a larger doctoral study examining how parents' use of social media shapes principals' professional identity, revealing how online discourse challenges traditional notions of school leadership. Central to this study is the power and potential of visual data representations in netnographic analysis. By integrating netnography with Maietta et al.'s (2021) visual coding methods, this research moves beyond traditional case study or open coding techniques, offering a dynamic and multidimensional approach to analyzing online discourse.

This netnographic study's data collection includes posts, comments, and reactions from online principal communities, enriched by in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten K-12 principals. This combination provides a rich data set that captures both the breadth and depth of principals' experiences. The "Sort and Sift, Think and Shift" method facilitates a systematic yet flexible approach to data analysis, (Figure 1 and Figure 2) allowing for the identification of critical themes and turning points. As saturation is difficult to determine in qualitative research, Malterud et al.'s (2016) concept of information power has been used, wherein data quality, not quantity, determines what conclusions can be reasonably drawn. Initial findings from the study demonstrate the utility of these approaches in uncovering the nuanced impacts of parental social media use on principals' professional identities.

Methodological innovations from this research have significant implications for educational leadership. Combining netnography with advanced visual coding techniques expands the methodological toolkit available to scholars. Findings related to themes of identity dissonance, agency and boundaries contribute to academic discourse and practical strategies, supporting principals in navigating their evolving roles.

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Strategic Communication with Heart

Vanessa Campbell, Nicole Bridges, Jenna Condie

Western Sydney University, Parramatta, Australia

Abstract

Not-for-profit (NFP) organisations play a vital role in supporting the community of Western Sydney, Australia. They provide invaluable services ranging from parenting support to food banks and crisis accommodation to counselling. The western suburbs of Sydney presents a set of unique challenges, including its cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) population, access to public transport and affordable housing options, and its perception of disadvantage. NFPs in this area are passionate and resilient but are finding it challenging to reach those who need their support and information.

Employing netnography (Kozinets, 2020), this research explored how social media can be harnessed to help NFPs engage their audience, and strengthen feelings of connection and community, while empowering them to meet their advocacy goals. A survey, in-depth interviews, social media observation, and an immersion journey were utilised to triangulate findings. Social media observation provided the opportunity to cross reference if the strategies that NFPs believed they are using are being implemented in real life. If the 'policies' they have created are being engaged. It was valuable to also learn what affordances were being utilised, what tone and style of communication was being employed, and what was yielding genuine conversation and interaction. These observations were fundamental to this study as it helped with building an understanding of how relationships were being fostered.

Schoenmaker's (2014) Engagement Framework and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Excellence Theory were used to explore how Western Sydney-based NFPs can use social media communication to generate online engagement and build trust, cultivate genuine dialogue and 'relate' to their target audience in a strategically effective manner. These communication and relationship building factors contribute to their ability to foster a more inclusive, resilient, and thriving Western Sydney.

Initial findings reveal that the barriers to effective communication can be traced back to a lack of human resources, knowledge, and financial constraints as the NFPs are competing against commercial organisations with funding for strategic communication activities. The western suburbs NFPs are finding that there is an ever-increasing demand for their support. As a result, they don't have funding or time to spare on tasks that aren't directly related to their core support function. Strategic communication is seen as the business function that can be sacrificed or, be done on an ad hoc basis due to a lack of available time or staff. The research found that NFPs have no or minimal paid staff, and the focus is on their core charter of helping the community. They usually don't have a dedicated strategic communication staff member, and if a volunteer is interested, they will create social media content when they are able.

In conclusion, NFPs recognise the need to engage with social media to help facilitate awareness of their services with their target audience and referral organisations. They recognise that they need a social media strategy to help improve the effectiveness of their communication but find that a lack of staff, knowledge, time and quality content is impacting their ability to be heard online.

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