
Original Article

Applying netnography to market research: The case of the online forum

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ABSTRACT Although the notion of netnography as a set of tools for exploring consumer behaviour online is not new, the potential of netnographic methods in market research and analysis is still largely undeveloped. In this article, we explore the ways in which netnographic techniques can be used in particular to understand the characteristics and effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth, an increasingly significant influence on the consumer's decision-making process. We provide an assessment of the main strengths, weaknesses and ethical concerns associated with the use of netnographic techniques. Unlike previous online ethnographic studies that have tended to employ broader socio-cultural observations, we analyse consumers' information-gathering and purchasing activities on a discussion forum. We relate our findings to a model that sets out three components of communications effectiveness: modes of persuasion that are based on authority, emotion or logic. We conclude by reviewing the implications of netnography for both academic research and marketing practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Less than a decade into the twenty-first century, the adoption of the Internet worldwide has more than tripled,¹ and users nowadays are becoming more inclined to spend their time online connecting with others, working and making purchases, as well as simply passing time.² The

global economic slowdown starting in 2008 has unexpectedly accelerated this shift: sophisticated consumers are abandoning traditional high street shops in favour of online comparison sites, according to Reynolds.³ For example, searches for and use of online coupon services increased by 90 per cent over the last 9 months of 2008.⁴ Practitioners can see significant commercial potential arising from these changes: Internet advertising in the United Kingdom achieved a growth rate of 19.1 per cent with £3350 million in 2008, and is projected to reach £4730 million

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in 2013.⁵ Yet this shift carries with it not just economic but also social and behavioural characteristics. The importance of developing measures to understand the scale, nature and impact of these changes is clear.

However, despite some seminal work in this area by academics such as Kozinets,⁶ compelling insights into consumer ethnography online remain relatively undeveloped by marketers, when set against the increasing penetration of the Internet into consumers' daily lives. This article aims to demonstrate the usefulness of netnographic methods for studying online phenomena through a systematic review of the approach alongside an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. An illustrative case study applying netnographic techniques to consumers' use of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in a digital camera purchase and decision is then provided by way of an example, before the consequences for marketing managers are explored.

AN OVERVIEW OF NETNOGRAPHY

As the marketing paradigm shifts from purely product-focused analyses, centring on concepts such as the four Ps (product, price, place and promotion), in an attempt to understand and address the more experiential considerations of consumers (such as their 'fun, feelings and fantasies'),⁷ methodological requirements have also shifted. Traditional normative and quantitative approaches have been complemented by the adoption of more qualitative, ethnographic methods from the social sciences designed to shed light in particular on consumer experiences by drawing on postmodern principles.⁸ Such methods have also been extended to online environments.⁹ Netnography, sometimes termed digital ethnography¹⁰ or virtual ethnography,⁸ is essentially the application of ethnography to a computer-mediated environment⁶ with the epistemological remit largely unchanged.⁸ A qualitative research method by nature, it is suggested that netnography can offer greater insight into the virtual space in relation to consumers' needs and wants, choices, symbolic meanings and more.

Traditionally, more qualitative field research – such as participant observation – requires the researcher to interact with their informants in a real physical setting, according to Taylor.¹¹ Interestingly, with the rise of Internet use and its popularity among consumers, evidence shows that individuals may be more open online than they are in real life.^{12,13} But how can researchers develop insights derived from face-to-face encounters in online settings? There is a lack of consensus on this issue. Lee and Broderick¹⁴ argue that netnographic researchers employ 'static words' used by online consumers but do not interact with them. Puri¹⁵ refutes this in suggesting that, by its very nature, the netnographic method requires researchers to 'live' in the virtual space in the same way as ethnographers. The genuinely anthropological nature of this intervention appears to benefit from the inherent openness of the Internet: there are few barriers when researchers choose to communicate with observers either online or by subsequent invitation to participate offline.

There has been little systematic investigation of currently available netnographic techniques. Like approaches used in conventional ethnographic studies, participant observation, non-participant observation and interview are common methods that can be employed by netnographic researchers. However, the choice of method is essentially an epistemological issue and is grounded in the philosophical assumptions made (whether these be realist, phenomenological or social constructionist). Kozinets⁶ suggests that netnography is 'based primarily on the observation of textual discourse' (p. 64). This non-participant stance has greatly affected the practice of subsequent work.^{16,17} But it is worth pointing out that netnography is by no means restricted to non-participant observation in studying the online phenomenon. Participant observation and email-based interviewing are also equally relevant and potentially powerful tools, particularly when used in a 'mixed-method' fashion to capitalize on the interactive nature of the Internet.¹⁸ Therefore, we switch among participant observation, non-participant observation and email/instant messaging

interviews at different stages of our research in order to both improve the accuracy of accounts and acquire data representative of the whole context of online interactions.

Netnography has several distinctive strengths for marketers. A combination of the Internet's substantial information-carrying capacity and the removal of individual social cues^{19,20} means that the researcher is provided with 'a goldmine of information'.¹³ This has a number of positive consequences:

- *Greater accessibility to a broader cohort of respondents.* (Researchers can recruit respondents quickly and extensively. The openness, anonymity and decontextualisation of the online environment enables people who are more reserved to participate in real-life focus groups or more flexibly respond to interview requests. Greater online openness may even lead to invitations to offline interviews being more readily accepted.⁹)
- *Greater continuity in research.* (Morgan and Symon¹⁷ documented how they were able to maintain contact with a respondent who had been transferred overseas after an initial face-to-face interview in the United Kingdom).
- *More economically viable and time-saving than conventional techniques.* (Netnography is essentially costless compared with research requiring physical travel and face-to-face fieldwork costs, making more ambitious studies potentially more feasible. Current research participants may be more easily persuaded to stay as part of a research panel for longitudinal research, which can reduce the recruitment budget.²¹)
- *Greater capacity and flexibility for observation and analysis.* (For researchers, the availability of a digitally archived data trail greatly strengthens the possible breadth and depth of research by permanently documenting otherwise perishable information. Blogs, discussion forum threads and posts, expert review articles, or the latest online video streams are generally archived and stored. The existence of digital 'footprints' of historical data not only streamlines the process of transcribing field data, but also permits the building up of insights on

an ongoing basis, consistent with the concept of grounded theory.²²)

- *The reflective quality of online discourse.* (An often neglected aspect of netnography has been the use of written statements. In a real face-to-face interview or focus group, there is limited chance for self-reflection before speaking. Correspondingly, there might be natural concern for the possible loss of 'first reactions', with respondents purposefully 'polishing' their written answers. However, the ability to directly quote online respondents, or make use of references to other members or to related links in their posts, for instance, could add greater explanatory power. For researchers also, because the data are comparatively easily traceable, the result could be a greater accountability and the promotion of 'research egalitarianism'.⁹)

As with any new methods, of course, there may be as many uncertainties and challenges as opportunities. Essentially, netnography suffers from five major weaknesses:

- *Respondent authenticity and instability of the user base.* (Questions about the authenticity of the respondents top the list of concerns. The use of pseudonyms and avatars raises difficulties for both researcher and practitioner to determine the identity of a member of an online feedback mechanism. It may sometimes even be difficult to distinguish a human from a non-human (chat robot) respondent. Virtual communities are often characterised by high churn and there may be high instability in the respondent base that will complicate the debriefing and follow-up steps for the researchers.²³)
- *An underdeveloped analytical toolkit.* (Despite the proliferation of publicly available research tools such as Google Analytics, netnography has a less well-developed system of analytical tools, often relying on whatever software is available in the market. Some scholars apply traditional methods with some modifications such as online questionnaires²⁴ and online critical discourse analysis.²⁵)

- *Potentially poor quality of textual discourse.* (Despite Kozinets' opinion of web discourse as 'eloquent and extraordinarily rich', the suspicion is that his choice of a sample of well-educated, high-end coffee drinkers as a sample base may have affected his conclusions. Contributing to discourse electronically on email, through a discussion forum or by any other mechanism that requires keying in responses, automatically limits the communication of written cues. This requires subjects to both have a certain degree of literacy and pay more attention when composing messages, or interpreting and paraphrasing the remarks of others. In addition, while offline focus groups are facilitated by a moderator, online equivalents may be difficult to manage in terms of the flow and order of discussion. This requires the researcher to identify the sequence of the discussion messages, and perhaps apply a degree of 'cleaning' of raw data to a 'proper' logical flow. However, this reconstitution of words and/or discourse needs to be carefully triangulated with other methods to ensure an accurate and objective analysis.)
- *Ethical sensitivity.* (Heated debate centres on what online information is considered to be private as opposed to public. Elgesem²⁶ argues that on the Internet the anonymity derived from such techniques as using nicknames offers an alternative way of protection. It is suggested that informed consent is not required.²⁷ King²⁸ firmly believes that the boundary between public and private is blurred on the Internet, which renders the consumer 'deluded about the quasi-public nature of their ostensibly private communications' – thus netnography research may pose a real risk to general online members. He argues that consent must be obtained from the participants. This may not be practical, according to Hudson and Bruckman.²⁹ However, Frankel and Siang²³ argue that from a legal point of view it is the informant's responsibility to determine what information they make public on the Internet. Researchers themselves are not immune: privacy leaks or even 'cyberbullying' are not uncommon for netnographic researchers.³⁰)

It may also be observed that netnography, like ethnography, often tends to focus on one or a small number of subjects. The extent to which generalisation is possible has been called into question. However, as the strength of netnography is ensuring a depth of understanding, focusing on a limited research object is critically important: Kozinets,³¹ for instance (pp. 279–280), defends this by suggesting that 'I offer a detailed unpacking of a single early post from a single Star Trek fan to demonstrate the nuanced cultural understanding and interpretive subtlety and depth required for netnography to reveal holistic cultural realities'. Other scholars suggest that owing to the large quantities of data that have to be managed, netnography researchers may have to restrict their focus by only following certain conversations (p. 228).³² Nevertheless, the weaknesses and other contentious issues surrounding netnography have served to inhibit the growth and development of this novel set of methods. The strengths of conventional research methodologies and the poor adoption of netnography within mainstream research, alongside the limited coverage of the techniques in textbooks, have all played their part.⁹ Johnson²⁰ also blames high software development costs for the slow adoption of digital consumer research. Perhaps the inertia of 'ivory tower' academic mindsets may also be to blame.

ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH

One phenomenon especially appropriate for netnographic analysis is that of eWOM. eWOM is a modified online extension of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM). It is often used in the literature interchangeably with 'word-of-mouth',³³ 'word-online',³⁴ and 'online word-of-mouth',³⁵ as well as being associated with 'user generated media',³⁶ or 'user generated content'.³⁷ Hennig-Thurau *et al*³⁸ define eWOM as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' (p. 39). However, this constrains eWOM as a static conceptualisation, leaving its potential as an information exchange process unexplored.

Although eWOM can also be defined as ‘peer consumers’ statements made online’,³⁵ this study, rather than adopting a constrained interpretation of the term, takes eWOM as a dynamic and ongoing information exchange process.

When we examine the behaviours and motivations surrounding conventional WOM, the importance of this distinction becomes clear. Conventionally, according to Aristotle^{39,40} we can distinguish between three potential means of persuasion: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. These three distinct dimensions render informal interpersonal communication powerful. *Ethos* signifies the projection of the speaker’s personal quality (or authority) to the listener, while *pathos* indicates the emotional appeal of the speaker. Finally, *logos* is interpreted as the logical discourse employed to get the message across.⁴¹ We propose using these concepts as lenses through which to measure the characteristics and effectiveness of eWOM.

ILLUSTRATION: RESEARCHERS AS NET-WHISPERERS – STUDYING THE EFFECTS OF eWOM ON CONSUMER PURCHASE OF A DIGITAL CAMERA

One way of applying netnographic techniques is to use them to study the ways in which consumers use eWOM to inform their purchasing activities. In the remainder of this article, and in a similar way to Kozinets⁶ research design, we examine online discussion forums – which, in this case, comprise sites dedicated to reviews of digital cameras. This seems a valid choice of product category. Riegner³⁷ suggests that pricy tech-electronics is the number one product category consumers bought after reading related eWOM. In addition, market analyst eMarketer⁴² suggested that 44.4 per cent of American electronics consumers are mostly influenced by WOM in making their purchase decisions. Three candidate sites were identified from leading search engine results: www.dpreview.com, www.digitalcamerareview.com and www.steves-digicams.com. We chose www.digitalcamerareview.com as having the highest number of visits and the strongest pedigree (established for over a decade). Online forums

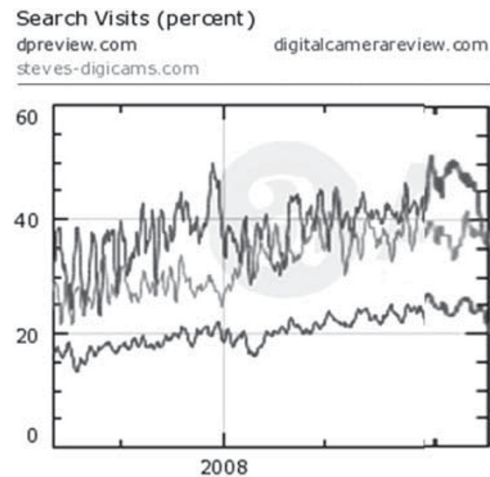


Figure 1: Search intensity for three leading camera review forums according to www.alexa.com analysis output.

that have existed for longer, and with a large, accumulated bank of discussions, can be seen as a proxy for data richness (Figure 1).

On the technical side, this site has a higher degree of information transparency, and engagement in discussion by views and threads. The availability of a complete history of activities in an archived form stands out against alternative forums. Our research took place over a 4-month period. Figure 2 shows the ratio of threads and posts by four sub-forums at the time of research: ‘digital camera news’, ‘what camera should I buy?’, ‘photography’ and ‘announcements and press releases’. Some of the sub-forums attracted a significant number of posts during the period: ‘what camera should I buy’ alone attracting over 8000 posts. In our analysis, we endeavour to retain the original texts from the digital camera review forum to preserve the naturalistic and unobtrusive characteristics that are seen as the key merits of netnography.³¹

We have already suggested that netnographic research raises a number of important considerations in respect of ethics. Discussion forums are no exception. First, in the choice of discussion forum, only a publicly open forum is selected for our study. This ensures a common understanding that the research observation takes place in a public place where the eWOM seekers

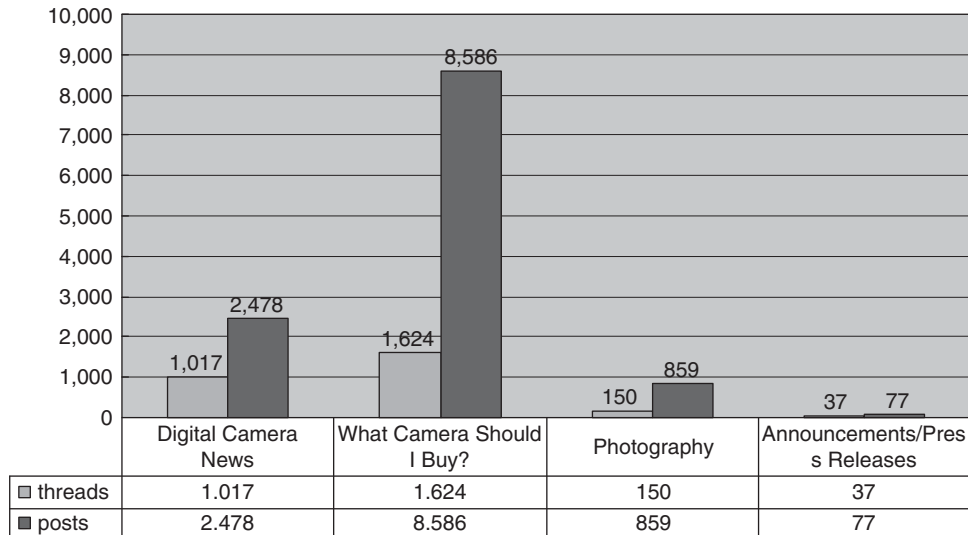


Figure 2: Descriptive statistics on four sub-forums by threads and posts. Source: Authors.

and givers are aware, or normally expected to be aware, that what they post is publicly accessible. Despite this, all the forum members who participated in our chat-room interviews and were subsequently discussed in this article are strictly quoted as ‘Participant X’ or ‘Moderator/eWOM seeker X’ (X= 1, 2, 3, ...) even if they expressed their consent to use their pseudonyms. This mechanism is used to protect all the participants, as Bruckman⁴³ suggests that pseudonyms function similarly to real names and should be treated with equal importance. Second, when the researchers identified potentially valuable forum members – those who posted questions that were most relevant and representative of buying decisions – a within-forum message was sent to the member inviting them to participate in the research. Electronic consent is obtained in our chat-room, as the risk to subjects in our research is low (that is, regarding how to use eWOM as compared with more sensitive topics), and thus consent with a signature on paper is not mandatory in this context.⁴³ Thus, we combine the strengths of the objective public data with subjective interviews with the subjects’ consent. For those who were interviewed via a real-time chat mechanism (that is, MSN), the researcher typed the consent into

the chat box and sent it to the informant. The informant could opt in or out: entering an online discussion after reading the consent is a form of agreement on a ‘social contract’. In contrast to Hudson and Bruckman’s²⁹ concerns over the levels of aggression they encountered when they revealed their research identities, a waiver of consent by disguising oneself as a casual chatter online did receive positive responses and interest initially:

Researcher: Hello, my name is XXXX, I saw your threads on digital camera review, can we have an interview please?

Participant 2: Sure ... wassup?

But as the interview went into any greater depth, the informant raised their concerns after the researcher revealed his research intentions:

Participant 2: State your case as a legitimate researcher. This is a formal chat.

Thus, how the researcher introduces himself/herself is an art: it should not be so formal as to negatively influence the interviewee or lead to an aggressive response – Hudson and Bruckman²⁹ received the responses ‘we don’t do studies’ and ‘lame ass spamm ... get a life’ (ibid, p. 134). Neither should it be too casual so as to make the

participant suspicious about the legitimacy of research under the cover of a relaxed chat. Finally, the researchers assessed the risks of privacy intrusion at each stage of the netnography and by checking with participants:

Participant 2: If it's not published I don't care you can use my real name. If it is [his/her forum nickname] is fine for publication.

THE TARGETING OF THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

It appears that threads across these four sub-forums all engage members in discussion, as reflected in the number of posts. This is particularly true for the 'what camera should I buy' category, wherein the posts largely outnumbered threads by a factor of at least 4.5. EWOM seekers were mostly active in getting their buying questions answered; we then specifically targeted this segment of online discourse. By registering on the forum, and tracing the forum moderator, an email interview was undertaken to confirm this belief:

The site administrators correctly recognize that the main reason people come to the forum is for help in determining which camera they should buy. There are so many digital cameras on the market that have so many features, it's very difficult for people with little knowledge on the area to feel comfortable in their buying decision, especially when they are considering spending hundreds of dollars for their camera. The forum provides a real service to the community. (Moderator 2)

From this moderator's account, the forum is positioned as a 'service' providing informed knowledge on digital cameras, which are comparatively large ticket items, where buyers need some decision-making support. His assertion echoes Riegner's³⁷ research, which concludes that 'pricy tech-electronics' is the number one product consumers bought after reading related eWOM. In other words, members on the 'what camera should I buy' sub-forum are more likely convert to actual buyers than those on the remaining sub-forums.

MEASURING THE ETHOS DIMENSION OF eWOM

Recall that ethos means the projection of the speaker's *personal quality* to the listener. How do we measure this online? The forum we are studying provides one useful mechanism: it ranks and labels everyone who posts or replies.

A member of the forum gets one point of 'reputation power' for every 365 days that they have been a member, and one point for every 200 posts made. If a member is given a positive 'rep' from someone else, they need 100 of those points to get a reputation point of their own. This automatic mechanism for quantifying the quality of online activities provides us with a rich data source and an objective way of assessing the authority, power and status of both the seeker and provider of eWOM.

Figure 3 clearly shows that, and as we might expect, the status of eWOM seekers is usually lower than the first eWOM provider. (There are often many replies to an initial post, and therefore we have simply captured the first respondent's status in this chart.) Although the criteria in relation to a poster's reputation vary among sites, this finding essentially indicates that, like traditional WOM, there are opinion leaders in the digital world as well. They are usually more experienced users of the forum and respond to posts within a few hours. In this case, the forum moderators fulfilled their role in ensuring that this takes place:

I got the digital camera site off the ground, so I spent up to 1–2 hours a day on the forums, making sure that every post had a response. (Moderator 1)⁴⁴

As a moderator, my biggest concerns are (1) making sure posters get prompt and comprehensive answers to their questions, (2) making sure the forum atmosphere is helpful and friendly, and (3) keeping the forum free of spam. (Moderator 2)⁴⁵

EWOM seekers are always outnumbered by the minority opinion leaders. In practice, most of the threads are answered by relatively few people. Figure 4 shows that the three top users actually contribute to 23 per cent of all the posts created

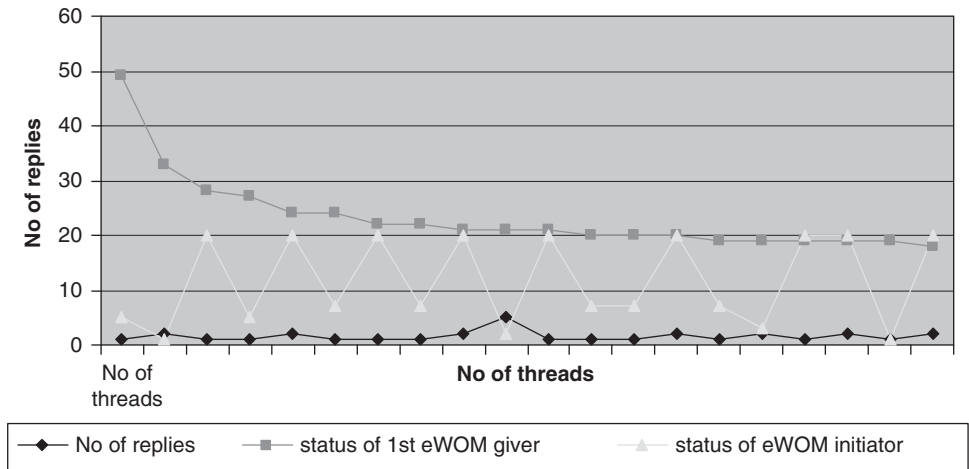


Figure 3: eWOM speaker status (by number of replies).
 Source: Compiled by the Authors.

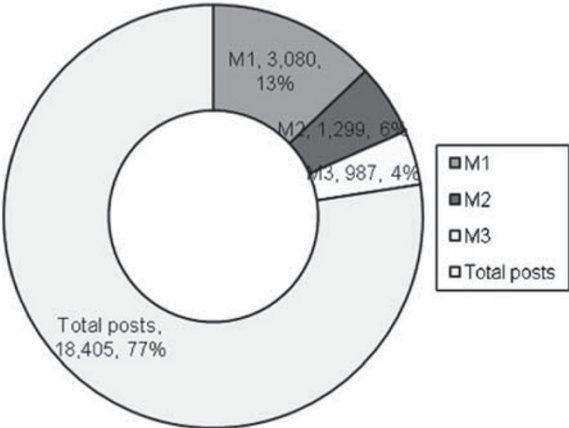


Figure 4: eWOM post participation.
 Note: 'M' represents 'Moderator' of the forum.
 Source: Compiled with the authors' data based on 15 May 2008 forum on-site statistics.

on the forum, with Moderator 1 contributing 13 per cent, Moderator 2 contributing 6 per cent and Moderator 3 contributing 4 per cent.

Moderators 1 and 2 feel the forum's advantage lies in providing better buying suggestions than traditional offline sources such as friends and colleagues, in that:

We have 'expert' and unbiased feedback to give people about cameras. Since this has been my full-time job, we see a lot of cameras (manufacturers send us review units), so we have a good baseline of product knowledge to let people

know how one product compares, in real-life, to another. Our other hope is that our reviews and recommendations are easy enough to understand to someone who doesn't know a whole lot about digital cameras. While a family member may have a camera that they really like, they usually don't know about the other brands/products that are out there, so may not be able to make a good recommendation that fits the person looking for camera feedback. (Moderator 1)

My knowledge is based more on my interest in the subject than my limited experience as a photographer. A person who seeks buying advice from the forum could probably get most of the information I could provide if he or she were willing to spend time on the internet doing research. However, most people would not be interested in putting in the necessary time and would not know of the most helpful sources. (Moderator 2).

In sum, the forum moderators' claims to be 'experts' rest on the twin contentions that they are interested in the subject as well as being professionals who see a wider range of products than prospective buyers. Their expertise is well understood by those forum members who post their buying concerns.

Because none of them [family and friends] really knew a great deal about the digital cameras currently on the market. (eWOM seeker 2)

The forum was after “independent” online reviews and the vendor websites. The inhabitants of this particular forum strike me as subject matter experts in photography ... My friends and family are not in touch with such a moving target as the photography industry. (eWOM seeker 3)

This study participant further explains how he assesses the ethos of an eWOM provider:

The credibility that I give to any individual replying to my request for assistance depends on a number of factors: primarily in this case how long and how involved they've been in using the site the advice they've given to others; and how satisfied the people have been with the advice received after making purchases where the information is available. The site appeared quite prominently in my various searches of the internet. (eWOM seeker 3)

Owing to deindividuation effects (the potential loss of individual accountability that can come with using the Internet), however, some forum members tend to also check with the query respondent's post history, the presentation of their written communication and the usefulness of their recommendations (according to others' feedback) as a proxy for the authority of the eWOM provider:

People using good English and vocabulary will take a significant ding to their credibility in my view. [For example] oh 'R U gonna B out L8r' that would reduce significantly in my view someone's credibility. (eWOM seeker 5)

That's honestly not something I give much thought to ... well, I just feel that there will probably be more genuine users on any given forum than skills [posters paid to promote a company's products]. (eWOM seeker 2)

My experience astroturfers are quickly exposed: where a community has been around for a long time and has a strong and active membership I think the problem self corrects. (eWOM seeker 3)⁴⁶

eWOM seekers also discuss how they attempt to judge the usefulness of particular recommendations in the context of competing ideas and suggestions on the forum.

Reviewing their posting history ... and most forums actually have 'grading' for how involved someone is: see how some people have 5 little blue boxes under their name? some have 4, some have 1;

If the person with the lower ranking was someone that had written a review site or had a strong internet presence outside the forum then possibly the person with the lower forum ranking; but in the general case the person with the higher ranking. (eWOM seeker 3)

In sum, it appears that eWOM seekers are generally pragmatic, and their attention is not so much on assessing credibility and authenticity – as traditional eWOM theory suggests. Rather it is focused on the usefulness of an eWOM provider's posts in addressing a particularly question, their posting history, the presentation of the written posts, feedback from other members of the forum, and (in this case) using the reputation power index as a proxy for quality.

MEASURING THE *PATHOS* DIMENSION OF eWOM

The notion of *pathos* explains how emotionally appealing the WOM speaker appears in the process of communication. This is important in terms of their ability to persuade. However, the effect of pathos in eWOM is less obvious online, when eWOM seekers are looking for purchase information. This is partly a result of the decontextualisation of 'written communications' in a forum, with the consequent and extensive reduction in interpersonal cues.

This research found that it is the level of emotional cues that is instrumental in how consumers assess the believability of eWOM. This finding confirms Pollach's⁴⁷ claim that serious eWOM providers tend to give their advice using neutral and non-emotive language. Pollach⁴⁷ also suggests that there are five

paralinguistic features of emotive language to be found in online messages:

- (1) the use of capital letters (that is, *WOW*);
- (2) putting words between two asterisks (that is, **really**);
- (3) the use of particular forms of exclamation (that is, *Recommended !!!*) or question marks (that is, *So what?*) or a combination of both;
- (4) the use of emoticons (that is, ☺☹); and
- (5) the use of acronyms (that is, *LOL* for laughing out loud).

The following accounts provide a good illustration of the potential role and effects of these emotional cues:

Emoticons make it easy to tell when someone's just goofing around rather than being serious ... but some levity can be helpful in establishing rapport and that goes into the credibility evaluation.

they're useful without being critical ... I find that higher ranked individuals will use emoticons no more or less than anyone else. However a note of levity is rarely useful when attempting to project a serious or authoritative statement. It's kinda hard to convince someone that they should part with their lifesavings while poking your tongue out at them. If you're trying to convince someone to go to a party then it might be ok. (eWOM seeker 5)

It should be noted that eWOM seeker 5's concern regarding higher-ranked repliers using as many emoticons as anyone else may be

groundless. By using interviews with online members and the forum's ranking of members' 'reputations' regarding the usefulness and integrity of their posts, we can assemble a comparison table of emotive language that shows a contrary story: anecdotally, eWOM providers who have higher reputations appear less inclined to use emotive language. This indication of emotions is only instrumental, and not determinant, in that the use of proper emotional expressions does not automatically discount the quality of the eWOM concerned (Table 1).

Further, the product category under discussion may also mediate the *pathos*. Unlike high-touch retail or no-touch services for instance, pricy electronic technology is comparatively more technically oriented (that is, it focuses more on functionality than on emotion). The following illustration contrasts messages posted on a fashion forum with those on the digital camera forum:

Re: advice on new camera

All three Canons you mentioned are very good. You can probably get the best deal on the SD1100IS, which is the smallest and newest camera of the three.

Re: Where to buy over sized beanie?

Dakota 501 on Chapel St quite often stocks Beanies like that! Great look! I love it! Although my head is too small so I can't really wear hats or beanies as I look, well, like I could be very ill so I am told! :(It's terrible! But you should definitely try and track one down!

It appears that discussion concerning fashion (in this case a beanie) is more emotionally loaded.

Table 1: Forum reputation rank and frequency of use of emotive language

Screen name	Reputation rank ^a	Frequency/counts of emotive language	Examples
Ben	No. 1	Rarely (1)	<i>Ah!</i>
Dennis (dr)	No. 20	Sometimes (3)	<i>WAIT!!! This is most likely an exposure issue, not a low-light issue!</i>
Via	No. 40	Often (11)	<i>I forgot to say, the 'print-outs' are even better than what I see on the LCD screen, or the computer, hands down ..!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!</i>

^aData are collected on posters only from the 'what camera should I buy' sub-forum, and are drawn from 10 random messages from all the messages the three members posted during the period 12 June – 24 July 2008. The three members are chosen from top 1 to top 40 to make the difference more evident and illustrative of any threshold effect.

Source: Authors.

For example, the intensive use of exclamation marks and emoticons to express what the speaker feels. In contrast, in the case of digital cameras, the eWOM provider was comparatively less emotive, but arguments are well supported by 'facts' (that is, SD100IS is probably the smallest and newest camera).

MEASURING THE LOGOS DIMENSION OF eWOM

'Logos', a word for reasoned discourse in the context of communication, is at the heart of this research. We find that in eWOM there is considerable importance attributed to the availability of 'reasoned discourse'. As eWOM seekers on the forum were looking to explore buying options rather than just to confirm existing views, they expected to find eWOM which would allow them to explore all the purchasing possibilities as well as responses related to specific queries.

I'm not too concerned with them not directly answering my question if their information improves my knowledge. In the example of the digital camera if I'd filled out the survey saying the most important thing was image quality and shutter response, and then said 'it'd be nice if it was compact' and I'm looking at these compact models I wouldn't view someone saying that 'you really want a SLR to get the best image quality and shutter response' as having low credibility. (eWOM seeker 3)

This pragmatic attitude towards reasoned discourse is mostly used in the 'product awareness', 'information searching' and 'price comparisons' stages of the eWOM seeker's purchasing process. Exploration of the 'which camera should I buy' sub-forum shows that the moderator and the senior member of the forum basically provide product-related information regarding the eWOM seeker's inquiries (in this case a junior member of the forum). On one occasion, when this particular eWOM seeker referred to price, the moderator immediately found that there was information of which the eWOM seeker was not aware. When

interviewing this eWOM seeker on why they did not return to the forum to discuss their purchase experience further, it appears that the forum discussion seems to be a one-off 'Q & A' process rather than a more conventional discussion and exchange of ideas.

Researcher: So after that purchase, why didn't you return to the forum to give feedback?

Participant: Because what I was really after was just some purchasing advice, I'd kinda forgotten about that forum ... I like photography, but I'm not enough of a camera enthusiast to want to stick around. I also don't recall it being a very active forum, which is no fun. (eWOM seeker 4)

Participant: I'm actually more of a taker. I read a lot of sources when doing buying research, but I rarely join and ask questions. (eWOM seeker 7)

HOW DOES eWOM RELATE TO PURCHASE ACTIVITIES?

Examining eWOM activity in its own right is instructive, but on its own does not tell us how the information received affects any subsequent purchase behaviour. How formally did participants regard the forum as part of the buying decision-making process? How did they find the forum? Interviews with participants on www.digitalcamerareview.com suggested that this site was generally found by means of a search engine that was being used to facilitate a buying decision:

Mostly because it was a sister site to notebookreview.com, which I was active on at the time ... I was searching on Google etc for information on making the purchasing decision and what criteria I should be aware of in this particular field the fact that a forum appeared prominently in this search led me to join the forum and post my 'problem' (eWOM seeker 3); 'Searching on Google'. (eWOM seeker 1)

This is confirmed by Alexa.com analysis, which indicates that the upstream site for was Google .com (33.12 per cent) and its downstream site was again Google.com (27.08 per cent). Next, it is helpful to understand to what extent the posted replies received by enquirers affected their

eventual purchases. Interviews both with site members who posted buying questions and with those providing suggestions show there is a cognitive discrepancy. The following accounts are percentage estimates of how eWOM affects eventual purchase:

Probably about 25–30 per cent unless something is brought up that really jumps out at me. (eWOM seeker 2)

Umm ... maybe 40 per cent for me it was about confirming my other research by presenting it to someone in a position to evaluate it to some extent. (eWOM seeker 3)

Triangulations with eWOM service providers – the moderators who wrote most of the replies – almost doubled this estimate:

I would estimate that our feedback (from reviews and forums) would impact a buyers' decision on a 7–8 range (10 being best). While our content may be answer exactly what a user needs to know, there may be some users that need more information on a specific function that we didn't cover well. (Moderator 1)

It is perhaps not unexpected for the moderators to overestimate the effectiveness of their services. But this gap in perception may also be a result of the lack of members' feedback about how useful they find the site and the messages:

Sometimes people tell us that they made a purchase based on our advice, but not often. I think it's useful if folks come back to the forum to discuss their purchases. It's possible that a camera we recommended is not as good as we thought. This is something we should know. (Moderator 1)

IMPLICATIONS

We now discuss some of the academic and management implications that arise as a consequence of this research. From an academic perspective, using netnographic techniques to investigate the characteristics of the online forum, and interpreting our findings through the lenses of the three modes of interpersonal communication, has greatly improved the quality of the insights we can obtain into consumer

purchase activities. Methodologically, too, our research develops and therefore demonstrates that netnography is a powerful practice by switching among different techniques such as participant observation, non-participant observation and email/instant messaging interviews to optimally address research objectives. Leveraging such a multi-method approach, this particular study has delivered a clearer view of the targeting, segmenting and analysing of online purchase activities in relation to consumers' search and use of eWOM in a high-ticket purchase situation. In addition, we propose that the potential ethical concerns around netnographic techniques should not remain an insuperable barrier for the wider practice of such methods in marketing research. We should remind ourselves that 'any method decision is an ethics decision'.⁴¹ Therefore, while the epistemological remit remains largely in line with that of ethnography, dealing with the ethical issues that arise from netnography is then up to the researcher's commitment and capability. Finally, the researcher should also note that the online community is socially constructed, in that social trends, movements and social consumption can be reflected online in real time. As more consumers turn to online retailers for bargains during the recession, this provides a richer data pool for researcher to target when measuring and analysing consumers.

There are at least three main managerial implications arising from this research. First, information asymmetry still persists online despite the advent of computer-mediated communication and information exploration: in other words, there is still a gap between consumers' needs and wants, and what the market can offer. On the one hand, sophisticated consumers turn to various online and offline sources for enquiry, information and potentially trial before purchase; on the other, ironically, some may be getting increasingly impatient and incapable of processing complicated information by turning to quick solutions such as online expert reviews or peer consumer reviews on specific purchase-related discussion forums. However, through this particular piece of netnographic research, we found that consumers do invest a fair amount

of time in searching for sources to validate their judgements. Personal strategies are developed by forum participants to raise questions, collect feedback, and discriminate between quality answers and others. Online opinion leaders, usually highly exposed to the relevant product market, are highly sought after in the forums for their higher status, or in terms of their *ethos*. *Pathos*, the emotional appeal, appears less crucial in the decontextualised online environment; nevertheless, some consumers have been found to examine an eWOM provider's archival trail, including the wording they employ, their spelling and even punctuation, as a risk-reducing strategy. *Logos*, the logical discourse of eWOM remains, like traditional WOM, highly relevant – in that statements stronger in *logos* are addressing a buying concern better than a poorly constructed and defended online recommendation.

Second, this research shows a window of opportunity for manufacturers, retailers and even advertisers to better improve their marketing practice based on new insights into consumers' needs and wants at the information-gathering stage of the buying decision-making process. For digital camera manufacturers for instance, developing insights into product or consumption characteristics being sought (such as waterproof and shock-protected cameras, or those that work under low-light conditions for use at parties) can be valuable. Highly trusted forum replies actually teach the best persuasion strategy – the mix of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. Learning real consumers' set of 'languages' – adapting, for instance, the product design, functionalities, and even promotional texts and images on packaging – could potentially reduce unnecessary market research costs and win customers' trust. Manufacturers' websites featuring displays and presentations (for example, product series and specifications) developed using a production-oriented mindset must be re-oriented in a manner that matches consumers' search strategies and knowledge levels. Take digital cameras for example. Generally, corporate sites list the full range of cameras types on their website, such as Sony's WX1, TX1 and HX1 or Fuji's J250, J210, J150w and J120. However, this appears to be

more for the manufacturer's benefit, driven by engineering, logistics and after-sales service concerns. Netnographic research suggests that consumers are often bewildered and appear less inclined to or incapable of distinguishing among all the highly saturated and increasingly homogenous offerings available. The most commonly occurring enquiry posts offer clues about both the potential customer's profile and insights into the language they use when discussing a possible camera purchase. For example, in choosing a digital camera in terms of usage, 'a beginner looking for a good non-DSLR that also takes HD video' is probably a more efficient and effective introduction to help consumers to find what they want than providing the whole range of cameras that have HD video functions from beginner to professional level.

Similarly, for retailers, a shelf barker might be better designed to incorporate the *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* elements by using, for instance '[name of a reputable consumer magazine] recommended budget 5 megapixel camera' to promote a trustworthy selling for a product offering. Online retailers could improve their website's stickiness by providing comprehensive digital camera user profiles such as 'party lover', 'business user' or 'water activity' rather than whole pages listing product engineering parameters for consumers to decode. Lastly, for advertisers, a concrete commercial based on real understanding of consumers from the digital camera forum, for instance, might not only provide differentiation from the cluster, but could also engage well with consumers. For example, a commercial featuring a story of a mother's purchase of a good camera for children's football and indoor school activities might be more memorable for certain types of users than, say: 'The Fuji F200 EXR features 12-megapixel Super CCD EXR, Fujinon 5.0x wide angle optical zoom lens, and a large 3.0-inch LCD. The FinePix F200EXR is Fujifilm's most advanced compact digital camera yet'.

Third, for firms such as comScore, and Nielsen Online, aside from their large clickstream data sets regarding what pages users view, time of per visit and so on, projects on how they live on the

internet along with qualitative and quantitative research methods are already starting to add a valuable dimension to the data collected for practitioner use.

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- 44 Moderator 1 is a 31-year-old male based in the United States, who is assuming the role of the General Manager of TechnologyGuide.com. Now he spends about 1 hour a week on the camera forums aside from managing his own site.
- 45 Moderator 2 is a 57-year-old male who retired from the US government after 33 years as a trial attorney. He spends about 2 hours per day on the Digital Camera Review forum and another hour or two per day on other camera sites.
- 46 'Astroturfers' stems from US political relations to represent those who appear to be 'grassroots' but may be financially backed by an organisation or interested group. Here it was used by eWOM seeker 3, to mean people who post supposedly independent messages on Internet forums but are supported by interested companies and individuals. Some other participants expressed the same idea in other terms such as 'shills' (that is, posters paid to promote a company's products).
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