The Online Life of Coffee Aficionados:
A Netnography of An Online Consumption Culture

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

—Peter, posted on <alt.coffee> 08/14/2000

This is one of many posts on online discussion groups that you may encounter and benefit from as a consumer researcher. Capture, read, and delve into enough of them, and you will begin to build some of the deeper insights that mark the best marketers. This work of understanding online communities is part of a new approach to consumer research called *netnography*. Just what is netnography? And what can the passionate online musings of coffee fans such as Peter teach marketers about consumers and their brands—not just brands of coffee but brands of any product category? To find out, read on.

Alt.Coffee: Coffee Wisdom on the Net

Alt.coffee has been serving up coffee wisdom for well over a decade. It attracts the attention of well over one hundred thousand consumers. Online communities like this exist for any number of other products. Consumers, particularly those consumers who are deeply interested in particular products or brands, inhabit such communities, in the physical world and online. In online worlds and social groups, they hang out, chat, educate and entertain themselves and one another. They do it in forums, on blogs, in virtual worlds like Second Life, and on social networking sites like Facebook. And in the process they take their product experience to a new height.

You can join a community, or simply watch it as a lurker. And you can learn a lot from it. About the community, about online worlds, and about consumption in general. A new breed of consumer researchers is doing just that. We call them *netnographe*rs. They perform ethnography—a technique from anthropology—on the Internet. The insights they discover can be amazing. Let us study their ways.

Ethnography: Inside A Culture

Let us first meet Netnography's elder sibling, *ethnography*. The word *ethnography* literally means 'writing about a culture.' Anthropologists, who specialize in studies of culture, employ this method and use "participant observation" as their approach. This means that, in order to write about a culture, an ethnographer will live in a community as a member, observing and participating in the life of that community. Ethnographers study the unique meanings, practices and products of particular social groups. Because it is a technique of careful observation and reflection, the most important instrument in conducting an ethnography is not a machine, a recording device, or a piece of software. It is the ethnographer. Professional ethnographers hone their skills with many years of fieldwork. They learn how to observe fine details, to record them unobtrusively, to learn new languages, to use interview techniques, and to carefully analyze meanings.

Unlike other forms of research, ethnography is all about the specific. Ethnographers study the members of a specific group, like the Bora Bora tribe or a football fan club. Within those groups, they seek to learn about specific things that make the group unique—their particular customs, their particular foods, their rituals; their ways of greeting; how they are being affected by the world today. And so on.

One of the greatest things about ethnography is its flexibility. The method is constantly adapted to study new types of cultures as they emerge. And so it is no surprise that it has come to be adapted to study online social worlds.

Now Meet Netnography

Anthropologists already know how to conduct ethnographies in face-to-face situations. However, the online world is different. Communications that take place through a computer are "mediated" communications. Text and pictures are used rather than the spoken word. People may not be who they seem to be. People can take more care and time to represent themselves. The type of information that is collected is different. Conversations are automatically saved, and linger in time. There are many conversations that are public, and anyone in the world can enter it, or listen in. All of these things make ethnography on the Internet very different from face-to-face ethnography.

Like ethnography, netnography is very flexible. It can be adapted to studying many different kinds of online communities. It can study social networking sites like Facebook, blogs or microblogs like Twitter, and virtual worlds like Second Life, Webkinz, or Habbo Hotel. And it can study the many forums, bulletin boards, and newsgroups that pepper the Internet. Like ethnographers, a good netnographer must be a highly skilled data collector and interpreter, using skills that usually require many years of training and practice to develop. Netnography also has certain rules, adapted to the special qualities of the Internet. To learn more about the techniques of netnography, see Exhibit 'A'.

Netnography is faster and less expensive than traditional ethnography. It can allow almost up-to-the-minute assessments of consumers' collective pulse. Because it is unelicited, it is more natural and less disruptive than focus groups, surveys, or interviews. It does not force consumers to choose from predetermined researcher assumptions, like surveys do. Instead, it offers a wealth of grassroots information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups. It offers a powerful window into the naturally occurring reality of consumers.

These are potent opportunities. However, there are matching challenges. It is relatively easy to download a few newsgroup postings, summarize them, and call oneself an online anthropologist. But skilled anthropology requires a finely-tuned instrument: the researcher. Raw data (or even medium-rare data) is not information. The form of online data can also be difficult to work with. Anonymity and deception can make conclusions more challenging.

But the opportunities are huge. Netnography offers us an opportunity to gain empathy with consumer groups. To truly understand consumers as full and multifaceted human beings—not a stereotype, not a collection of numbers. To hear their own stories, in their own words. Read their chosen names. Learn to speak in their language. Begin to see through their eyes. Learn their "tribal dance."

Online Communities: What Are They?

Some would say that there are no mass markets anymore. That is because consumers are all not the same. Some would say that there is no mainstream anymore. That is because consumer culture has split into a new world of consumer tribes. The modern marketplace has fragmented into smaller groupings of communities and tribes.

Motorcycle enthusiast gatherings and fan clubs were just the start. Many groups share a connection based upon their enthusiasm and knowledge for a consumer activity, from Harley-Davidson to Star Trek to the Apple iPhone.

How to Research Online Communities

Although netnography is inherently an open-ended form of inquiry, ethnographers choose from related field procedures and often confront similar methodological issues. Common ethnographic procedures that help shape researchers' participant-observation include:

1 **Making cultural entrée.** This includes carefully plotting strategy, surveying the online field, previewing different forums and sites, creating web-pages, contacting culture members

2 **Collecting data.** This includes planning for the collections of: (a) observational, downloaded data, including text, photos, images, and audiovisual productions, (b) elicited data such as interviews, and (c) reflective research field-notes

3 **Analyzing data.** This includes qualitative coding and categorization, and the derivation of more abstract themes and theories from the coded observational data; computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software programs are often helpful to assist with the analysis of large amounts of netnographic data

4 **Striving for trustworthy interpretation.** This encompasses carefully analyzing different types of data, keeping the data in context, analyzing the social act of communication and not the anonymous poster, other pragmatic methods for avoiding overstretching the interpretation

5 **Ensuring ethical standards.** This often follows human subject research laws and includes gaining informed consent where appropriate to do so, appropriately citing online sources, and providing opportunities for culture member feedback.

These consumer gatherings are not limited to fan clubs, conventions, bike rallies, in-store and in-home meetings, by any means. They spill out into virtual space. There,

they gather structure, momentum and followers.

The New Consumer's wiring is tribal. As beings who are increasingly mediated by technology, consumers plug into networks to connect. Their communication runs in feedback loops, expressing information and emotion through pictures and words. And these communications can provide many valuable insights to the marketer/researcher.