Virtual Methods and Digital Methods: Examples of Netnography and Digital Ethnography for a Comparison between Methods for Analyzing the Digital Scenario in Tourism Studies

With this paper our goal is to formalize the main differences between the applications of ethnographic techniques when they are framed in the Virtual or Digital Methods. To be more systematic in presenting these differences, a synoptic table is offered. This table examined the main breaking points between the methods and is used to organize a marked comparison between two tourism studies chosen as representative, one for the ethnographic application of Virtual Methods, and one for the ethnographic application of Digital Methods. In addition to testing the effectiveness of the proposed classification scheme, the purpose of the comparison conducted between the two tourism studies is to highlight where the changes that have occurred can lead to advances in the method and where these changes became new limits on which it is necessary to continue to reflect in order to bring maturing the involved methods and putting them clearly in line with the evolutions of the digital scenario.

Keywords: Virtual Methods, Digital Methods, Netnography, Digital Ethnography, Tourism Studies.

Introduction

Starting from the observation «Web-mediated research [...] is already transforming the way in which researchers practice traditional research methods transposed on the Web» (Amaturo, E., and Punziano, G., 2016:35-36), with this contribution we intend to retrace the main differences that substantiate the strands of virtual methods and digital methods.

We recover the vision of Hine (2000), about the virtual methods. He affirms that the classic techniques of social research can be transposed on the web and theorizes that the web can be interpreted as an object of study. This is how the survey becomes web survey or the interview becomes web-interview or, again, the participant observation becomes netnographic practice.

To this vision, that keeps the object of study separate from the methodological practice, we intend to contrast a vision, linked to digital methods, in which the object of study and the methodological practice come to merge into an integrated whole, so as to coin the motto follow the medium as a cognitive and methodological imperative together. This is Roger’s vision (2009), for which classical techniques cannot be of help in their only transposition, but it is necessary to hybridize the techniques with the means (the Net) to find the methodological key that allows to produce a deeper, dynamic and truly fitted knowledge on the digital environment. And here, the classic techniques, with which there were directly produce data (survey, interview, observation), leave room for techniques that make use of the data already
existing on the net, the natural metrics inherent in digital platforms and the
information that indirectly cover the spectrum knowledge that moves the
interest of the social researcher in the digital age.

To formalize these differences of approach and highlight limits and
advantages in the use of the two perspectives, examples of research related to
the study of tourism (Mkono, Markwell, 2014) will be examined.

In particular, the attention will be focused on a netnographic study
(following the approach of Kozinets, 2010 for whom netnography suggest
immediately an approach adapted from the authentic and traditional
ethnography technics to the virtual communities studies in the idea of a «Social
aggregation that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on […] public
discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling to forms webs of
personal relationships in cyberspace», p. 8) and one calibrated on the digital
ethnography approach (following, this time, the approach of Murthy 2008, for
whom digital ethnography suggest a fully digital approach, sometimes covered,
but at all linked to the use of already existing information treated with the help
of other specific techniques, such as, content or network analysis).

Then, the methodological reflection will leave space for a broader
reflection linked to ontological and epistemological questions upstream of the
separation of the two presented approaches.

The Starting Point: The Classical Ethnographic Method

«Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, […], in
people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens,
listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal
interviews, collecting documents and artefacts» (Hammersley, Atkinson
2007:3). This is one of the most shared definition of the classical
ethnographical method that bring to the attention some important features that
nowadays are gradually challenged by the fast-paced advent of the digital age.

Ethnography is a method based on direct observation. Of course, when
doing ethnography, it is also essential to listen to the conversations of the actors
‘on stage’, read the documents produced in the field under study, and ask
people questions. Yet what most distinguishes ethnography from other methods
is a more active role assigned to the cognitive modes of observing, watching,
seeing, looking at and scrutinizing (Gobo, Marconiak, 2016).

Ethnography is a method with more than one hundred years of history. It
arose in the Western world as a form of knowledge about distant cultures
(typically non-Western ones) which were impenetrable to analysis since we had
only fleeting contact or brief conversations (Gobo 2011).

Since the 1980s – and even more with the advent of the Internet – the
meaning of ethnography has been expanded to such an extent that it
encompasses forms of research that are extremely diverse from a
methodological point of view. The stretching of the term ‘ethnography’ has
emptied it of its original meaning. Ethnography was born as a technique based upon direct observation. By contrast, interviews and surveys are mainly based upon listening and asking questions. Of course, it is also essential in ethnography to listen to the conversations of the actors ‘on stage’, read the documents produced by them, ask people questions but they are ancillary sources of information because what most distinguishes ethnography from other methods is the active role assigned to observation (Gobo, Marciniak, 2016).

Classically, the observation can be covered or uncovered, participating or non-participating. The form of participation largely determines the contents of the experience that the researcher can experience in the field and the empirical basis that will be available. Spradley (1980) distinguishes participation in four ordered classes: passive, moderate, active and complete.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Level of participation in ethnographic practices on the field, according to Spradley (1980)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Level of participation</td>
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<td>Lurking</td>
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<th>Table 2. Participation on the net, according to Kozinets (2010)</th>
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<td>Participation</td>
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As we will see, if all ordered classes of participation have been the domain of the classical ethnographic method, with the advent of digital the styles of participation are distorted and are increasingly hybridizing with unobtrusive forms of research. You certainly want very far from the ethnographic style and increasingly dangerously close to another family of methods that has its particular soul, history and set of techniques, completely different from ethnography: let’s talk about the content analysis.

The internet revolution had a profound impact on ethnography. For the first time, it became possible for any researcher to simultaneously access online information, actions, interactions, communities and cultures located in different places. The “online ethnography” designate variations regarding above all the conduct of fieldwork (Gobo, Cellini, forthcoming). The online ethnography breaks with the traditional methods of the discipline because all the data is usually collected online without meeting the people concerned face-to-face. The problem raised by online ethnography is both theoretical and methodological: can online cultures, communities or interactions ever be sufficiently understood if the ethnographer is not in the field? Does ethnography depend upon the physical presence of the ethnographer during the people being studied? (Hammersley, 2006).
As we will see, online ethnography is a highly differentiated and rapidly evolving field. The different proposals for conducting online ethnography are the result of the ways in which different scholars conceptualize the internet, which ranges from a culture to an instrumental context for social interaction.

Recent examples of online ethnography are evidence that ethnographers can be active observers and participants in the field, even though the field is not physical; or they could have a passive role of indirect not participant observers of the field, by studying it without the complete immersion but only through extract meaning from existing secondary data spread on the net. In the following paragraphs we will explode these changes and new differences among the way of doing ethnography in the digital scenario in order to clarify some interesting point not always so explicit.

The New Scenario

Internet studies located in 1990 the turning point for social research: thanks to the rising of web as mediated interaction environment emerge new empirical approaches. First, these approaches try, but without a good result, to totally replace the traditional ones, by adapting (and then revolutionizing) the classical techniques to the new emerging paradigmatic.

The Internet logic has drawn spaces and languages for relations, actions and practices that the social research examines to understand the complexity of social change: the digital scenario without doubts has been guaranteed in last 20 years as not insignificant frame for social science because of its power of identity building, information and knowledge sharing in the architectures of relations and network made by users via Computer mediated communication (CMC). So, today can be useful retrace its reshaping steps looking through the breakpoints of adapting and arising capacities of social researchers in web(Internet)-based methods.

The first kind of identification of a specific type of Methods born around the Internet Social Research Studies was represented by the formalization of Virtual Methods. They were born starting from the idea of the cyberspace intended as a place allowed to file big amounts of information useful to realize how large could be the part of the social culture present online and considering internet not only a cultural context, but as well a cultural artefact, a flexible, dynamic and pervasive object (Woolgar, 1996).

Following these requirements, the vision of Hine (2005) where «the theory of research methods become meaningful only when you start to try them out for yourself, and it have always had to be adaptive» (p.2) conduces the social research to a path where the cyberspace, focused as a new place for methods, has been shaped as cultural context where traditional methods could be adapted and transposed online by CMC.

The adaptive mood permits, in fact, the transformation of the traditional ethnography in its virtual vocation: the nethnographic practice intended as the
cocktail that Hobbs (2006) describes as the repertoire needed to understand a
describes the repertoire needed to understand a
particular culture, conduces the traditional research actions, most of the
observation, in a switch to the web environment where real communities
become web-communities preserving, or creating, substantive networks and
relations into the cyberspace in the way where netnographic object is the
social aggregation that «emerge from the Net when enough people carry on
[...] public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling to forms
webs of personal relationships in cyberspace» (Rheingold, 1993: 18).

In the 2000’s, the social research wondered if and how the heritage of
traditional methods was exposed to the opportunities of new medium gains
(largely in efficiency, costs and breadth of geographic reach) and threats
(response rates, loss of representativeness of population and quality of data).
The air of innovation and changing, in fact, provided for a sense of anxiety
created by the perception that «nothing can be taken for granted» (ibidem, p.5).
because of the ontological level of this approach based only on the aspects of
the medium that entails high limits to produce reliable and consistent sets of
data.

The digital era has been in fact an unquestionably moment of change.
Going further from the field of study that identifies awareness, identities,
citizenship, policy and corporeal social structures via the exclusive social
research way characterized by the relation human-machine, got enforced year
per year the idea of connection between internet and territories, thanks to tailor-
made information produced by users history, geolocate etc. and left online.

Starting from the own media infrastructures and techniques the science,
social and technology trends drove in 2000’s the social research to a revolution
model made by the hybridization of classical techniques and digital
environment (the net), replacing cyberspace second life and refusing the
online/offline, virtual/real coexistence. The vision of Richard Rogers (2009)
about Digital Methods, the second way used to try to explain new class of
methods in Internet Studies, in fact, suggests a dimension focused in a whole
dichotomy digitalized/digital native information about social action, relations
and practices. In particular, it considers the only perspective of web native
elements that, adequately analyzed, permit to recreate a new internet story from
the inside of the device and its own agency (Rogers, 2013:14): «the digital
context become so an additional and integrated social participatory place of
people’s daily life where the researchers take account not only of the web as the
object of study, but as well the role they play in relation with it».

Digital methods, in this way, does not work as an approach useful to
confirm the online environment results, but instead to use the web also as
source and not only as the object of study, following the medium evolution and
thinking how to rearrange digital objects, going further from the research that
«is limited to the study of online cultures» (Rogers, 2007:28). Was no more
important to understand how much culture was online, but instead how to
«focus the cultural change and social conditions through internet»
(ibidem:48,49). Lazer et al. (2009) confirms that digital methods are not simply
a series of techniques useful to analyse web available data that describe social
actions: the researcher in fact works as an investigator through data available
on 2nd sources but as well moving through the medium labyrinth understanding
the information produced by users or best by social platform: working through
reading and observing actions, in fact, these information come translated in
data and analyzed approaching several (eventually mixed) methods typical of
content analysis, that refers to any kind of analysis that attempts to derive new
mining from existing content (Krippendorf, 2018). The ethnographic approach
derived from digital methods called digital ethnography indeed, differently
from the nethnography that is directly tied to the spaces within the subjects
move, arises simultaneously with the environment inside it works, and is
capable to enlarge and analyse every relations cluster not concerning the
subjects in a place as the virtual world (Consolazio, 2017:81), but rather in a
temporary association of strangers made for mutual purposes in a cooperation
that will lose its properties also after few hours of its highest density moment of
sharing (Arvidsson, Caliandro, 2016).

Tacking out the fact that the net of a temporal subsequently between its,
the virtual ones are not expired in disuse for social research and the digital ones
are still in their attesting phase, this background marks several differences
between these two families of methods, explaining the main break between
them that rest on the switch from the ontological to epistemological identities
of the methods and stressing the debate about an important clarification
regarding the distinction of data identities: virtual, digitalized and digital.

Provoked and User-generated Data

As virtual data we intend all the information that permit to understand a
social setting in a fieldwork switched online in the way that i.e. the survey
becomes web survey or the interview becomes web-interview, with a difference
for the observation actions that can find a proper use also with a no intrusive
configuration.

As digitalized data we intend all the information that before the
transposition online come from any sources as books, tv programs, movies etc.
and that become useful for the online content analysis, in a way quite different
respect of the offline one only due to the economic saving and speeder
elaborations, but also considering more specifically the processes of entry,
storage and management of such data.

As digital data, instead, the plentiful literature of digital sociology (see
among the others Marres, 2017; Lupton, 2014) intends all the traces left by
users during their online activities, that produce original empirical elements not
attributable to previous approaches, but produced by the natural structure and
dynamics of the net and so tied to the new idea of grounded web\textsuperscript{1} within which
the researcher can move following the medium. Therefore the virtual/digitalized

\textsuperscript{1} Richard Rogers (2007:46) proposes a research practice that can learn from device methods,
reworking its for new purposes trying to confirm the assertions about cultural change and social
conditions throughout web data and introducing the expression of online groundedness.
data stand out as «provoked data» and digital ones as «user-generated data»: both portrayed by the spontaneity value during their production (Natale, Airoldi, 2017; Rogers, 2009).

**The Involvement in Post-demographics Approach**

The constitution of these research methods is also reflected properly by their web-ethnographic approach that, moreover, define the related grade of involvement of the subject observed.

The migration of information, from offline to online, outlines a dissimilarity in rapport to the hybrid Rogers’ vision: the virtual data, in fact, not only can’t be persistent in the scenario as the digital ones (Boyd, 2011), but more, «the digital data are natural, spontaneous and not forced by the researcher requests due to the lack of cooperation between observator and observated» (Cardano, 2011:25).

The nethnography, in its participant version, that works on provoked data concern a not negligible direct involvement of individuals who compulsory have to spend time interacting with the researcher, in a way quite different for the digital ethnographer who works via querying and reading techniques on already existing digital contents i.e. social network scraping, spheres compared analysis, source distance analysis, internet as archive etc., that left unaware of the research the authors of the web traces left.

The paradigmatic revolution made by social research through the application of digital methods causes the crossing of *avatar* concept and no more consider as unit of analysis the individuals, but rather the users activities that open to the post-demographics opportunities: the social research indeed enlarge its *spectrum* passing over the main focus of the social-demographics properties of subjects (age, location, gender, job etc.) being today also vigilant on the users relations, networks and social practices showed via new media platforms in terms of reactivity, behaviour, and preferences.²

**Data construction and data collection: the base models to set a comparison between nethnography and digital ethnography**

Last 20 years of paradigmatic change have so clearly reshaped the way how social stories are communicated through the own reshaping of ethnography.

Cultures are studied in their natural state still today, also if adapted or rediscussed in innovative and experimental frameworks.

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²Purposing the partition of the society and social context in groups aggregated by socio-demographic properties, post-demographics could be thought of as the study of the personal data in social networking platforms, and, in particular, how *metaprofiling* (Rogers, R., 2004) is, or may be, performed with which findings as well as consequences ([https://digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/PostDemographics#Post_45demographics_63](https://digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/PostDemographics#Post_45demographics_63)).
The research field, intended from Bailey (2007:2) as the «systematic study, primarily through long-term, face-to-face interactions and observations, of everyday life» for example switched in different new clear or latent configurations useful to join the description of cultures set «as they really are respecting the aspiration of any methodology» (Hine, 2000:42) permitting researchers to do a proper ethnographic work following Hammersley and Atkinson basic definition (1995) regarding the possibility to an overt or covert participation in people’s daily life.

The identification of different properties tied to the research fields connected to nethnography and digital ethnography defines and summarizes the breakpoints between them and, then, between their family methods.

The main one: the question about the available data needed «to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research» (ibidem). It conduces the nethnographer and the digital ethnographer to different models for the research planning and action: the first one, in fact, stand to the construction of the own data, reaching information and translating its simultaneously to the approach of the analysis in a gradually results interpretation building. A way quite different compared to the traditional ethnography that separate procedures providing to the collection of field and methodological notes useful next for the analysis processing. The digital ethnographer is closer to the traditional model than the nethnographer, at least for what concern the no-synchronic research and analysis phases: the hybridization of techniques and environment of the digital scenario in fact gives the opportunity to the researcher to collect data regarding concepts (non) imposed a priori on 2nd sources, then to organize its by proper instruments, then to experiment many analytical models, choose the best one(s), and finally argument interpretations of results. This model, moreover, opens to the possible fragmentation of the research mechanism in order that a professional actor as computer engineer can collect the online data, a different one as data scientist can organize and evaluate it by techniques, and a social scientist can interpret results.

### Methodology

With this paper our goal is to formalize the main differences between the applications of ethnographic techniques when they are framed in the Virtual or Digital Methods.

To be more systematic in presenting these differences, a synoptic table is offered below. This table examined the main breaking points between the methods in order to be used to organize a more marked comparison between two exemplary “Tourism studies” chosen as representative, one for the ethnographic application of Virtual Methods, and one for the ethnographic application of Digital Methods.

In addition to testing the effectiveness of the proposed classification scheme, the purpose of the comparison conducted will be to highlight where
the changes that have occurred can lead to advances in the method and where these changes became new limits on which it is necessary to continue to reflect in order to bring maturing the involved methods and putting them clearly in line with the evolutions of the digital scenario on which they try to intervene.
Table 2. Systematization of breaking point occurred in time and with the advent of digital era on the ethnographic approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Braking point</th>
<th>Classical Ethnographic Method</th>
<th>Virtual Method with Netnography</th>
<th>Digital Method with Digital Ethography</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal definition of the method and kind of understanding actions required to the researcher by level and kind of participation</td>
<td><em>In-depth understanding</em> of social scenario and social life using different level of <em>direct participation</em> in this scenario.</td>
<td><em>Web transposition</em> of the classical method to construct understanding on digital scenario using different level of <em>direct or indirect participation</em> in this scenario.</td>
<td><em>Innovation</em> of classical method to extract understanding from digital scenario using the Net as object and as methodological tool using <em>lurking techniques</em> not necessarily connected with direct participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualization of the field</td>
<td>Physical place in which communities, their cultures and the social and daily life take place. The social scenario could be useful to detect the culture of a specific community regardless of its aims, objectives and purposes.</td>
<td>Internet as scenario in which are proposed pieces of daily life, communities, cultures, etc. The cyberspace is intended as a place allowed to file big amounts of information useful to realize how large could be the part of the social culture present online and considering internet not only as a cultural context, but as well as a cultural artefact, a flexible, dynamic and pervasive object.</td>
<td>Internet as object/place to study and as a methodological tool for studying. It was considered the only perspective of web native elements that, adequately analyzed, permit to recreate a <em>new internet story</em> from the inside of the device and its own agency. The digital context become so an additional and integrated social participatory place of people’s daily life where the researchers take account not only of the web as the object of study, but as well the role they play in relation with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main technique</td>
<td>Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts.</td>
<td><em>Netnographic</em> practice intended as repertoire needed to understand a particular culture, that conduces the traditional research actions, most of the observation, in a switch to the web environment where real communities become web-communities preserving, or creating, substantive networks and relations into the cyberspace in the way</td>
<td><em>Digital ethnography</em> use the web also as source and not only as the object of study, following the medium evolution and thinking how to rearrange digital objects, going further from the research that is limited to the study of online cultures or web-communities. It was no more important to understand how much culture was online, but instead how to</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
where netnographic object is the social aggregation that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling to forms webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

<p>| Research actions and their level of importance | Observing as main research action + a series of research actions that produces ancillary sources of information as passive listening + querying + reading (the actions to observe and to list are functional to extrapolating knowledge from the participant experience; the action to ask is instead functional to asking clarifying questions about the way in which the researcher is interpreting the situation; the action to read is also functional to inform the interpretation of the phenomena at which the researcher reach). | Observing also by reading + asking to second source digital materials + active retrieval instead of passive listening, all these actions are considering on the same level of importance. The researcher works as an investigator through data available on 2nd sources but as well moving through the medium labyrinth understanding the information produced by users or best by social platform: working through reading and observing actions, in fact, these information come translated in data and analyzed approaching several (eventually mixed) methods typical of content analysis. |
| Involvement of the observed | Possibility to inform or not the members about the research purposes. | Possibility to inform or not the members about the research purposes. | Not necessary to inform the members about the research purposes. |
| Involvement of the observer | Getting involved in the community activities. | Getting involved or not involved in the web-community activities. | Not involved in the community activities. |
| Level of involvement by time | Direct involvement in people daily life for an extended period of time in order to better understand the community. | Direct or indirect involvement in people internet daily life for an extended period of time in order to better understand the web-community. | Indirect involvement for a brief period of time, generally functional to confirm the main interpretation of the research. |
| Kind of used data | Not digital | Virtual or Digitalized | Digital |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Propensities and extreme in ethnographical practices</th>
<th>Auto-ethnography in which prevail the identification, the “being part”, of the investigated community which is approached through a collection of pieces of knowledge produced by the direct sense of the researcher.</th>
<th>Virtual endo-ethnography in which prevail the identification, the “being part”, of the investigated community which is approached through a collection of pieces of knowledge produced by the direct sense of the researcher jointly to a collection of documents and artifacts that are analyzed directly and indirectly leading ethnographic style to be defined as endogenous.</th>
<th>Digital exo-ethnography in which the absence of identification, of that “being part”, of the investigated community which is instead approached through a collection of documents, contents and artifacts that are analyzed indirectly, leads the ethnographic style to be defined as exogenous.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kind of access</strong></td>
<td>Face to face access to information actions, interactions, communities and cultures located in the same place.</td>
<td>Online access to information, actions, interactions, communities and cultures located in different places.</td>
<td>Online access to information, actions, interactions, communities and cultures located in different places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Way to collect secondary data</strong></td>
<td>Collecting document and artefact by asking the community permission.</td>
<td>Collecting document and artefact by asking the web-community permission.</td>
<td>Construction and extraction of data, document, artefact just deposited on the net and with free access for the researcher of for whom for it extract the material to analyze.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Way to collect/construct primary data</strong></td>
<td>Construct field-note, diary, mental maps and all the material necessary to systematizing the knowledge construct process.</td>
<td>Construct field-note, diary, mental maps and all the material necessary to systematizing the knowledge construct process.</td>
<td>Web scraping and API’s use to extract material from the net directly connected to the social phenomena that the researcher will analyze making primary use of secondary data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where is the ethnographer?</strong></td>
<td>Ethnographer is in the field.</td>
<td>Ethnographer is in the online field.</td>
<td>Ethnographer is not in the field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of intrusion</strong></td>
<td>Intrusive and unobtrusive: the data is usually collected meeting the people concerned face-to-face.</td>
<td>Intrusive and unobtrusive: the data is usually collected meeting the people concerned virtually.</td>
<td>Unobtrusive: all the data is usually collected online without meeting the people concerned face-to-face or virtually.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How to reach the interpretation?</strong></td>
<td>More active role assigned to the cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at and scrutinizing, in order to</td>
<td>More active role assigned to the cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at and scrutinizing, in order to</td>
<td>More active role assigned to the capacity of interconnect different kind of data coming from the net, generally user-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolutive scheme of research</td>
<td>scrutinizing, in order to reach a total interpretation of the investigated phenomena by analyzing provoked and not-provoked data.</td>
<td>reach a total interpretation of the investigated phenomena on the Net by analyzing provoked and not-provoked data.</td>
<td>generated that indirectly talk about the observed under-investigation phenomena.</td>
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<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gains</td>
<td>Circularity among all the phases from the research design to data collection to interpretation to the return on the analyzed actors and scenario.</td>
<td>Circularity among all the phases from the research design to data collection to interpretation to the return on the analyzed actors on the internet scenario.</td>
<td>Separation of the collecting and interpreting phases. Different subject could be responsible for the different actions so that the research design become an integrated path of analysis, disciplines and capabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>Long-term in-depth studies of communities circumscribed in space and not too large data sets. Large control on representativeness of population and quality of data.</td>
<td>Medium gains largely in efficiency, costs and breadth of geographic reach.</td>
<td>Medium gains largely in efficiency, costs and breadth of geographic reach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long period of time, costs, geographical weight, as well as the fact that the researcher is one and on his own must develop and take charge of all the research phases.</td>
<td>Impossibility to have control on response rates, loss of representativeness of population and quality of data.</td>
<td>Impossibility to have control on response rates, loss of representativeness of population and quality of data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Our elaboration.
Now, following all the recalled differences among Classic, Virtual and Digital approach to the ethnographical method, the following paragraph will offer an application of this scheme to better understand the introduced difference in applying ethnographic research on the digital scenario. According to the common interests of the authors, the following paragraph refers two example of Tourism studies, the best fund in literature which lend to the comparison aim: one by A. Rageh, T.C. Melewar, and A. Woodside, in 2013 on «Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience», used to explain the main braking point belonging to the netnographical practice; one by M. Muskat, B. Muskat, A. Zehrer, and R. Johns, in 2013 on «Generation Y: evaluating services experiences through mobile ethnography» used, instead, to recall the main differences with the digital ethnographical practice.

Findings: Studies on tourism and comparison of the “Virtual netnographic” and “Digital ethnographic” perspective

The research group composed by Ahmed Rageh, University Utara Malaysia, T.C. Melewar, Brunel University, and Arch Woodside, Boston College, worked in 2013 on the study «Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience». This study was focused on the customer tourism experiences and aimed to identify its underlying dimensions through the validation of concepts isolated a priori and concerned in the literature within the tourist industry in Egypt.

The authors based the research method in a way useful to focus the reflexive narratives that people publish online about their experiences, so clearly stated on netnographic approach tied to Kozinets vision of the «adaptation of ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications» (2010: 131). The authors consider the web as a flexible, dynamic and pervasive object where in fact, through the cyberspace, is possible to study the visitors’ experiences thanks to their online reviews: the chance, indeed, to shoot offline phenomena via online activities. This perfectly in line with the aims and the delineated perspective on the side of the ethnographical practice in the frame of the Virtual Methods where prevail the identification, the “being part” of the investigated community which is approached through a collection of pieces of knowledge produced to a collection of documents and artifacts that are analyzed directly and indirectly leading ethnographic style to be defined as a endogenous.

They adapted ethnographic techniques starting from transposing a traditional structure of investigation on the online research field. First, the access in the most important online groups composed by tourists from all over the world via the best platforms where gather data (TripAdvisor.com and Holydaywatchdog.com), then the selection of needed contents
discarding off topic reviews, short messages with no information, and promotional messages, then analyzing data with the help of an IT tool named Nvivo and finally respecting the research ethic conditions asserting that web sites utilized for this study are «established as public forums of communication and that consent has become unnecessary for the analysis of public postings» (Rageh, A., Melewar, T.C., Woodside, A., 2013:135).

The research action adopted has been the observation in a non-participant way that and it, also if not expressed in the methodological description of the article, is hybrid-shaped with reading techniques. These are useful to approach the unit of analysis (reviews) first constructing field notes and maps, i.e. as for the kind review choosing for the analysis (ibidem:134), and then collecting the only necessary data on a second source (the websites) with the permission of community admins. This research draw has so not concerned the users’ involvement, who have been unaware of their participation, as well obviously the researcher participation has not been intrusive. And this is a not so obvious feature since generally the classical ethnographic observational practice transposed online should also include the full involvement of the observed community. However, it is clear that for the type of community observed this would have been impossible. The authors’ choice, therefore, was to hybridize the method by choosing a curvature towards non-intrusiveness instruments and the secondary digital data already present on the network, in a way more closed to the ratio of the ethnographical practices in the frame of Digital Methods.

The study, anyway, respects the active role assigned to the cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at and scrutinizing, in order to reach a total interpretation of the investigated phenomena on the Net and exploiting the potential gains in efficiency, costs and breadth of geographic reach. In this case, being based only on virtual non-provoked data, entails not few threats for findings reliability: the trustworthiness of users networks, relations, habits and identities, in fact, urges to be ensured by a long-term indirect engagement whit the participants for an extended period of time in order to better understand the web-community. Participant who, anyway, can’t produce feedback to the researcher because of the unobtrusive research action that stops the classic nethnographic circularity among all the phases from the research design: to data collection to interpretation to the return on the analyzed actors on the internet scenario.

Always on the concept of experience is based the research conducted in 2013 by Matthias Muskat, Birgit Muskat, Anita Zehrer, Raechel Johns named «Generation Y: evaluating services experiences through mobile ethnography».

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3 This study analyzed the informants’ experiences from the journal entries by following the principles for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by Spiggle (1994), Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Arnould and Wallendorf (1994). Relevant themes to research hypotheses were identified and then the emergent themes were compared with preconceptions derived from the literature (Rageh, A., Melewar, T.C., Woodside, A., 2013:135).
The exploration-study purpose was to understand how museums are experiences-centered places and how its are perceived by Generation Y thanks to the identification of the customer journey, providing an insight into service experience consumption and deriving managerial implication for the museum industry of how to approach Generation Y.

The method is based on the innovated idea of mobile ethnography that sees the individuals dressed simultaneously as consumers and as active investigators capable to give back opinions about their personal vision of a product, a service or an experience. The absence of identification, of that “being part”, of the investigated community which is instead approached through a collection of documents, contents and artifacts that are analyzed indirectly, leads the ethnographic style to be defined as an exogenous. The digital exo-ethnography is the closer style to the post-demographic approach that’s no-more vigilant to the individual characters, but rather to the user relations, networks and social practices showed in this case via the digital device in terms of reactivity and preferences.

The empirical basis has been built concerning the only digital native elements: data are not in fact transposed from other mediatic sources, but directly produced, and then collected, via digital connected technologies: so extracting material from the net directly connected to the social phenomena that the researcher will analyze making primary use of secondary data.

The process concerns the information delivering from the user and the data collection from the researcher in the same time, and in the real time of the action: the reporting of the evaluation of the visit experience, in the same time of the experience. This conduces to consider the web no more only as an object but taking account as well the role the actors (users and researchers) play with it in a context become a social participatory place of

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4 Generation Y, which is often referred to as Generation Next, Millennials or the Net Generation, usually refers to people born between 1982 and 2002, distinguishing three generation units:
- Generation Why (born 1982-1985);
- Millennials (born 1985-1999);
- iGeneration (born 1999-2002)

5 MyServiceFellow is the result of multiple publicly funded research projects and is one of the first prototypes of a mobile ethnography app (see www.myservicefellow.com). The app enables users to capture touchpoints right now of an experience. It allows adding and evaluating touchpoints on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from +2 to -2) and documenting touchpoints with text, audio, photos or videos, which can be each individually flagged as positive or negative. Participants can download MyServiceFellow to their smartphones (i.e. Android phones, iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch, etc.) from the Android Market Place or the AppStore. The caption of date, time and GPS data of each touchpoint allows the construction of a customer journey based on either route or time sequence of the user, even for complex tourism products. The data of each user is then uploaded to a web-based analysis software called ServiceFollow, which visualizes the touchpoint sequences of different users as a touchpoint matrix. While the rows visualize each customer journey as a horizontal sequence of touchpoints, columns can be used to represent the same touchpoints of different users. The users’ touchpoint assessments are aggregated to mean values to identify critical incidents immediately. These critical touchpoints (positive or negative) and their consolidated documentations can be the starting point for further in-depth research.
people’s daily life. The «user-centered design of this method» (Muskat, M., Muskat, B., Zehrer, A., Jonhs, R., 2013: 59) is based on the user spontaneous and generated contents: is in fact the customer who decides how, when, and what evaluate of his experience: all through a device that, thanks to its open manner configuration, brings to the researcher a translated data that could not be intended as the result of a singular research action, but rather a new kind of output that involves together observation, querying and reading action in an unobtrusive way.

Taking account of this specifics, merge different threats for the application of the study and its further evolutions. First a not perfect control on response rates, a potential loss of representativeness of population and quality of data: the software used has been developed to also capture GPS signals allowing the creation of maps useful to watch eventually the participants’ journey in their service experience, but during the experiment was not possible at the museum to capture GPS data exploiting the benefit of the technology feature. Second: the limitation in the exploratory nature of the study. There’s a necessary involvement of the aware observed because of his/her spontaneous participation during process, but in the same time a no-involvement of the researcher who is not in the field and has no identity for participants. The indirect involvement, kept only for the exploration study time, has not been enough to confirm the main results interpretation of a research that needs more in-depth works beyond the limit of the single case study conducted in the only museum of Canberra (ibidem: 60).

As merged in the description of the case studies, there’s several threats among the two ethnographic approaches that mainly don’t permit an acceptable helpfulness of results to the research. The cases have as well demonstrated that is possible an hybridization of methods, so now is important ask how can be possible to reduce threats avoiding the exclusive and separated use of methods, but rather approaching its in a cross adoption well adapted and drawn case by case exploiting their singular gain powers.

Open conclusions and new challenges for ethnography to test the digital scenario and the introduced method revolutions

The discussed evidences highlights a particular suggestion of the proposed theoretical classification scheme: although the understood practices can be used as extremes, netnography and digital ethnography can no longer be thought of as placed on a continuum that allows gradualness in the intermediate choices to be made by firmly fixing the starting points, the cognitive objectives and the results to be achieved.

This specific reflection leads us not to close this paper with a canonical discussion and conclusion, instead it moves us on a plane for which it becomes decidedly more appropriate to conclude the argument carried out leaving room for the questions that remain open regarding the reflection that needs to be continued to develop around the future of ethnographic practice
in the digital age. Without claiming to be exhaustive, some of the lines of research on which to continue the reflection could be drawn from the questions that we leave here at the end.

Considering what has been shown, can it still be said that ethnographic practices are always so appropriate in the new scenario? Do these really work better than their classic version? What classic structures could, instead, be recovered/re-evaluated? What is the scope of exclusivity of the two methods and to what extent can they coexist or merge? What happens to ethical issues? Can they really be shelved without particular reflection? How much will it be necessary to use digital or digitized data instead of shifting the research to the data produced by sensors completely reversing ontology and research actions?

These are just some of the questions that can be brought to the reader’s evidence, and certainly do not cover the vastness of the semantic field touched upon. However, they clearly reveal the concerns and possibilities that the digital scenario is opening up for ethnographic practice and the digital ethnographers.

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References


