



forward thinking series

Getting answers without asking questions

The evaluation of a TV programme based on social media

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social media.

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A philosophy of listening

Every year, companies spend over 25 billion dollars on market research worldwide. Companies organize focus groups, surveys, and interviews in order to better understand consumers. Without a doubt, such research is valuable. However, the question must be asked: do we really listen enough to our customers? Do we not influence them by asking questions? In many studies, market researchers ask ‘respondents’ to answer questions for which all options are predefined (Comley, 2006). Even if research participants can answer openly (e.g. in qualitative research or through open questions), they seldom get the chance to start the dialogue and to make the conversation themselves.

In contrast to the ‘culture of interviewing’, more and more people spontaneously give their opinions about brands and products on the internet. The rise of blogs, forums, review sites, social networks and other 2.0 applications has given customers an easily accessible platform to express their thoughts. Collectively, this group of social media has enabled a revolution in user-generated-content. User-generated-content is online content that is produced and published by users as opposed to traditional media producers such as broadcasting- and production companies. It implies creating new content or reshaping existing content outside professional routines and practices.¹

The amount of user-generated content is rapidly increasing: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are moving into the mainstream. More and more social media components (e.g. forums, the possibility to connect with other users or to rate articles) are incorporated in traditional websites. The spectacular growth of user-generated-content, also called social buzz or online conversations, has been demonstrated by a recent Universal McCann study among 17,000 active web users: the number of people who watch movies online has increased from 32% to 83% globally in just two years. Similarly, the amount of active users reading blogs grew from 54% to 77% whereas the percentage of people who write blogs has gone up from 28% to 45% (Smith, 2009).

¹ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/57/14/38393115.pdf>

The influence of user-generated-content in our lives is undeniable. We are confronted with it every time we look up information on the internet. Through social networks, we are connected to people we never met before. The online buzz even influences our daily offline conversations because the online information is also shared when people talk to each other face-to-face.

When looking at the impact of user-generated-content on market research, we notice that it are mainly *social media tools* that have been integrated into the market research toolbox. For example, in order to better connect with customers, we conduct focus groups through chat and community software and diary studies via blogs (Schillewaert, De Ruyck and Verhaeghe, 2008). The analysis of the *actual content* of the spontaneous consumer feedback for market research has so far remained limited. This is a bit surprising given the fact that this content can be an interesting source of information. There are several reasons why market research should study the content of online conversations:

- In contrast to traditional market research where individual answers are not public, comments on social media can be read by everyone. One single post can have a very big impact as it remains online forever and reaches a large audience. Whether companies like it or not, social media are nowadays a full element of *communication and advertising* that influence people in their buying decision process. Because social media communication is largely controlled by consumers, there is an increased need for marketers to know what consumers tell online about brands or products.
- In a time where response rates in traditional research are declining, these spontaneous answers are a welcome source of information. The industry is realizing that panel and survey participants are a scarce resource that should be used carefully. One action we can undertake to maintain our *research ecosystem* is data recycling. If we already have information available about a research question, we can re-use existing information instead of collecting new information about the topic. Especially for topics with high involvement (like health) or topics with a strong link to the internet (like technologies), we can take advantage of the large amount of existing information online.

- Online buzz also contains *new quality information* which is not easily available via traditional research.
 - We can increasingly access the internet anytime, anywhere. Dissatisfied consumers rate a brand on a review site even on the spot using their mobile device and people consult online forums before they buy a certain product. If we ask people to describe those experiences in post-hoc market research, we often get a more rationalized story. Social media research gives us a glimpse of the *moment of truth*.
 - Digging into online buzz allows researchers to *go back in time*. Even if we did not intend to study a certain topic, we can still conduct the study based on historical data. Likewise, we can estimate the impact of planned actions (e.g. the launch of a new product) or external events (e.g. the economical crisis) by comparing the buzz before and after an event.
 - Since we deal with spontaneous feedback, customers are able to talk about their issues freely. This allows us to take a bottom-up approach. Since no predefined questions are asked, interviewer bias is absent. The analysis of social media content is a good way for discovering blind spots in current thinking about the market and as such lead to *new market insight*. This is even more applicable for *socially sensitive topics* about which people often talk more openly due to the anonymity of the internet.
 - In contrast to classical word of mouth, word of mouse gives us access to authentic text and everyday vocabulary. This allows researchers to look at the *natural language and wording* when talking about a need, product or brand. Studying wording is particularly interesting when focussing on the tonality of the conversation. By looking at the number of *positive and negative emotions* surrounding a certain topic, the attitude towards a topic can be derived.
- called 'blog trackers'.² In general, they are the online equivalent of measuring, for example, awareness of brands or products over time. Often reported through dashboards, they display the share of voice of a certain brand or product in the social media space. Using this method, blog trackers only tap into part of the potential user-generated-content has to offer. Market researchers could, however, exploit the amount of buzz in a more in-depth manner:
- If there are enough data available about a certain topic, user-generated-content can be useful to answer ad hoc questions as well. Note that, before conducting a (blog)tracking study, it is advisable to first undertake a detailed baseline measurement of a certain topic before starting to measure the topic over time. If not the study is prone to errors of omission since important themes for tracking can be overlooked.
 - So far, blog tracking has mainly been used for conducting research on brands or products. It can, however, also be applied to investigate a broader range of investigative research questions like following first feedback upon launching a product, assessing customer experience and measuring the impact of a viral campaign.
 - While blog trackers are tools that facilitate the access to user-generated-content by end users, they only offer the possibility to conduct basic descriptive statistics. Since they are designed for daily use, they are monitors in which marketers may often lose the bigger picture. By applying more advanced analysis techniques using data of from longer time period, bigger and hidden patterns in the data can be discovered.

In order to optimally take advantage of the availability and rich amount of user-generated-content, we have developed a new methodology called "social media netnography". It allows researchers to make use of large amounts of information in order to optimize products, get insights into certain target groups, and learn more about (online) branding. This paper will explain the methodology of social media netnography with the aid of two cases and demonstrate how RTL Nederland listened to their consumer audience using this new methodology.

So far, spontaneous online buzz has only been assessed in market research via what is erroneously

² Blog trackers generally contain a different set of social media including forums, micro blogs, review sites, comments on pictures, comments on online videos and blogs.

Social media research, a new research paradigm

What is social media netnography?

Social media netnography, also called digital ethnography or mass anthropology (Kearon, Earls, 2009) is a research methodology that makes use of publicly available user-generated-content in order to answer a research question. Figure 1 illustrates where it is situated in the market research landscape.

Data collection method. In terms of data collection, social media netnography is part of the branch of observational research where participants are not directly interviewed. This implies that social media netnography is exploratory by nature: one is completely dependent on what customers spontaneously post on social media platforms. Of course, researchers can increase the likelihood of encountering user-generated-content that is relevant to answer the research question by framing the context that is observed.

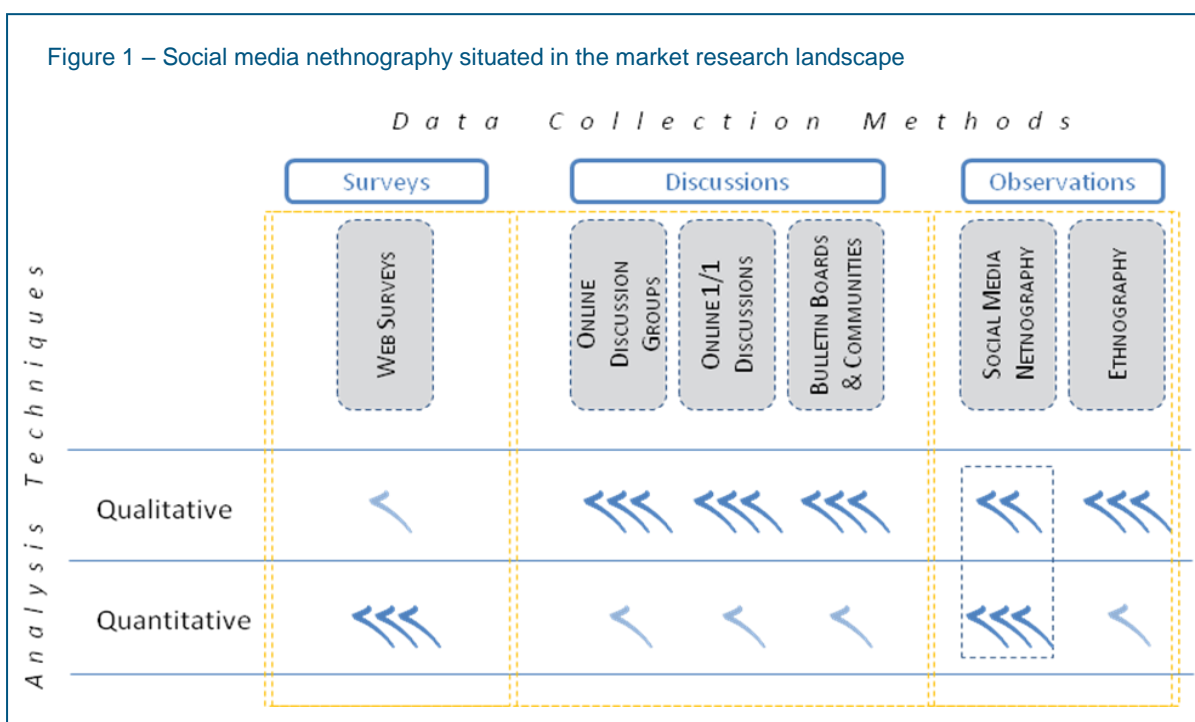
Analysis techniques. Typical market research firms have qualitative and quantitative approaches. In social media netnography, the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative information blur. The unit of analysis shifts to text, which is typically the field of a qualitative researcher. The large amount of information, however, allows a more quantitative approach. This means that both qualitative insights as well as quantitative statistics are reported. In terms of

reporting percentages and statistical associations, in fact, the analysis is done with text analytics. Text analytics can be applied to all forms of unstructured data. The method becomes especially interesting when large amounts of information need to be processed or when the text contains a great deal of information. Examples include comments on open questions in quantitative surveys, digital transcripts from traditional qualitative research, contact forms of companies' websites, internal customer feedback data and textual user-generated content on social media.

What research questions can social media netnography answer?

In essence, this methodology can be used to answer any research question as long as there is sufficient user-generated-content available online about the topic of interest. Although this may seem a very straightforward answer, it is often hard to apply this rule in practice since there is no list or sample frame of the online user-generated content available.

A fundamental distinction in social media netnography studies can be made between bottom-up and top-down. In a top-down study, researchers study the user-generated-content with a clear focus. Information that is useful to answer the research question is filtered from information that is not related to the research question. In a bottom-up approach, we keep an open mind from the beginning. In this case the researcher does not have a specific research



question but wants to know in general what people are saying online about a certain topic. Within a certain observation universe, one tries to detect the different cluster themes within the user-generated content from the bottom up.

What are different steps in the research process of a social media netnography study?

Some steps in the research approach of social media netnography are similar to those in traditional research. The order of the individual steps, however, is quite different:

- The first phase is *sampling*. Unlike traditional research methodologies, we do not need a sample of respondents but a sample of internet sources.
- In contrast with what is often thought, we still need to *collect data* (e.g. by means of web scraping, a computer software technique of extracting information from websites) and store them in a database.
- The next phase is *framework development*. Within one single unit of user-generated-content, not all information that we have collected is equally relevant to a research question. Therefore, we need a selection within each post of information that is interesting for further analysis. In essence, this phase is very similar to making a topic guide or questionnaire in traditional research. The main difference is that instead of defining what you want to ask, one decides what part of one specific online conversation to keep for further analysis. For example, in the sentence 'the dress of Annemiek was beautiful', one wants to maintain the words 'dress', 'Annemiek' and 'beautiful' for further analysis.
- The final step is the *analysis phase and reporting*. The analysis consists of a mix of traditional qualitative coding techniques, quantitative and text analytics. In this phase, there is a need for an increased cooperation between researchers and marketers. Especially in the case of a bottom-up analysis, the end user needs to guide the market research to indicate what is already known within the company and what themes are interesting for further exploration. By definition this implies there is a need for multiple rounds of analysis and interaction.

We have applied this social media netnography research paradigm recently in cooperation with RTL Nederland to evaluate two television shows: 'So You

Think You Can Dance' and 'X Factor'. In the next section of this paper, we will describe both cases and illustrate this new research paradigm.

The case study: The evaluation of television programs

RTL Nederland is a trendsetting multimedia company and has a leading position in the Dutch broadcasting market with four TVchannels, a radio channel and an extended Internet network. Seven days a week, 24 hours a day the TVchannels RTL4, RTL5, RTL7 and RTL8 amuse and inform many viewers with programs such as news and showbiz, soap operas, international soccer and a diverse array of movies and TVseries. The main objective of RTL Nederland is to serve viewers in the best possible way by offering high quality and distinctive programs. Therefore, it is of great importance to evaluate programs on a continuous basis. Research on their TVprograms helps RTL Nederland stay in close contact with the audience, their wishes and to optimize the broadcasted programs and programming.

For the feedback study, two popular RTL Nederland TVshows were selected, *So You Can Dance* and *X Factor*:

- *So You Think You Can Dance* is originally an American TVshow, broadcast on Dutch television for the first time in 2008. The show is all about dancing. Candidates must attempt to prove – both on their own and in pairs – that they are good dancers. Every type of dance is allowed, ranging from modern, jazz, hip hop, classical, Latin / ballroom and old / new school. The best dancer wins an acknowledged training of his or her choice abroad, pocket money worth over \$26,000 and a solo performance in the new dance musical '*Footloose*'.
- *X Factor* is the biggest music talent show in the Netherlands for everybody aged 15 years or older, solo singers or vocal groups. The show originated in the United Kingdom, where it was devised as a replacement for the massively successful *Pop Idol*. The "X Factor" of the title refers to the indefinable "something" that makes for star quality. In *X Factor* contestants are divided into four categories, boys aged 15 – 25 years, girls aged 15 – 25 years, age 26+ years (male and female) and vocal groups. The best act wins a recording contract and a lot of

publicity due to their appearance in this popular TVshow.

So You Think You Can Dance and *X Factor* both have the same character; the show starts with auditions from which the best contestants are selected, followed by several episodes where the viewer gets a closer look at these selected contestants, their talent and personality (respectively called 'Boot Camp' and 'Jury Visit'). In this stage of the show, viewers start to have preferences for certain contestants which may lead to them becoming fans of the individual performers, as well as higher involvement during the last stages of the show, termed the Live Shows. In these episodes, contestants perform live on stage, in front of an audience and the viewers decide who stays and who does not.

Information needs

The scope of both market studies was twofold: on the one hand general findings that can be used for future broadcasting of the show and on the other hand the evaluation of specific aspects in order to make adjustments during current broadcasting. Important research topics of both studies were: the jury, the choice of music, the themes of the Live Shows, the program's Internet pages, the presenter, the scenery and of course the contestants themselves. As mentioned above, both *So You Think You Can Dance* and *X Factor* consist of three stages: auditions, Boot Camp/Jury Visits and the Live Shows. Since the first two stages are recorded before broadcasting, adjustments can only be made during the Live Shows.

From theory to practice: lessons learned from *So You Think You Can Dance*

We applied the new research methodology to the evaluation of *X Factor* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. *So You Think You Can Dance* was a considered as first test case where RTL Nederland wanted to have a better idea what value user-generated-content on social media could have for program evaluation. During this journey, we learned some valuable lessons about applying social media netnography in practice and in future projects:

1. Not all social media sources are equally important.

The internet is too big to analyse all user-generated-content on a topic. As in traditional research, it is therefore crucial to select a good sample of information sources. In order to accomplish this, we

make use of the long tail theory (Anderson, 2006). This theory claims that social media sources differ in the number of people they reach and content. There are three types of sources:

- A small number of websites have a lot of visitors and are therefore very influential. These influential sources need to be incorporated in the sample. Examples are Hyves and www.forum.fok.nl
- A bigger group of websites has fewer viewers but is specialized in the topic of interest. These sources are generally consulted by advanced and more involved users in the domain. Therefore certain themes will be discussed first on those websites before they spread through the first group of websites. For that matter, we guaranteed that they were present in our sample. An example is http://partyflock.nl/topic/1028112:RTL5_So_you_think_you_can_Dance.html
- The biggest group of websites, often referred to as 'the long tail' is only visited by a very small group. Because of this limited reach, the long tail websites are of lesser importance and should therefore not necessarily be part of the sample. An example is www.turkstars.nl

2. Determine the context before you start.

An important element in the sampling process is defining the scope of the research. In accordance with other observational research, the researcher needs to decide how he is going to find observations that will give an answer to the research question. In the context of social media netnography, this is done by determining the right key words in cooperation with your client. In order to eliminate as much "white noise" (Brodesky, 2009) as possible, those terms should be as specific as possible. For example, for *So You Think You Can Dance*, we also added 2009 or RTL to ensure that we got conversations about the right show. Alternative spelling, anagrams or spelling errors are also taken into account (e.g. the abbreviation SYTYCD for *So You Think You Can Dance*).

3. The internet has no country boundaries.

The internet has no strict boundaries when it comes to languages. In order to determine which posts originated in a certain country we have to rely on the language of the post and the ending of the URL. Since the program was broadcasted on Dutch television, we only looked for user-generated-content in Dutch coming from websites where the url ended with .nl.

4. Blog tracking should be called social media tracking.

Blog tracking wrongfully insinuates that only “blogs” are included in our sample. For the evaluation of the television shows, we incorporated a wide variety of social media types such as forums, micro blogs (e.g. twitter), social networks (for the Netherlands this was mainly Hyves) and comments on videos shared online (e.g. YouTube). In our case, we did not find any relevant posts on online review sites or picture sharing websites, two types of social media that are also commonly used in social media netnography.

5. Data collection is more than simply pushing a button.

Before we can start the analysis, the extraction of all information from the sample of social media needs to be done. People who are new in the field of social media research often wrongly assume this can be done by a simple ‘copy paste’ of the data. The collection of user-generated-content involves, however, the usage of special data collection techniques. The most common technique is web scraping, also known as web harvesting, web data extraction or screen scraping. In line with general market research principles, only information that is publically available was collected. No individual traceable information was divulged and data were analyzed on an aggregated level.

Another issue that is important is data quality: One single online conversation contains different information units: A post generally consists of the text and date. Where available, we can also gather the location and gender of the poster. For certain social media like YouTube or forums, even metadata like the number of viewers of a certain post can be collected and can be interesting to estimate of the impact of the online buzz. Before starting the framework development and analysis, the different information units from the different sources need to be integrated and normalized (e.g. the date of each source is put in the same format.) In order to increase data quality, the data need to be filtered for doubles or spam.

6. Text analytics is a valuable tool for building the framework.

In total we collected more than 14,000 chunks of information for *So You Think You Can Dance*. These massive amounts of information are a dream for market researchers. In order to ensure that those quantities do not turn into a nightmare upon analysis, text analytics was a helpful tool for building the framework. It assisted in identifying and tagging chunks of information within one single construct that was useful for further analysis. Although the researcher can deliberately look for certain terms based on theory or previous research, text analytics, using libraries of predefined words, will also give the researcher first suggestions about terms that are present in the text.

Previous studies (Verhaeghe et al, 2008) have shown that text analytics delivers a similar but richer tagging in comparison with traditional manual coding. Consider the following post about *So You Think You Can Dance*.

'In the last broadcast of So You Think You Can Dance, I would like to know who the band or artist was that you could hear on the background during the dance-act of Kevin. This song was truly great, with a lot of swing and very funky. Which band/artist/title was this? Does anybody have a link or information on this?

In a traditional manual analysis, we would only extract the core idea from this verbatim being that somebody is looking for the music from Kevin's dance-act. As high-lighted in the text, text analytics will, however, consider every word in this paragraph which leads to a richer coding.

7. The netnographer of the future is a hybrid.

After selecting the right sample, collecting the data and building the framework with text analytics, the actual analysis can start. The researchers can use the different tags to create different categories or variables needed to answer the research question. Both qualitative, quantitative as well as text analytics skills are required to conduct a netnographic study thoroughly. In order to structure the analysis, we developed the augmented research model for observational research. As shown in figure 2, this model consists of three layers.

Layer 1 Descriptive Taxonomy detection: Based on the frame-work, one creates variables for in-depth analysis through a predefined taxonomy. For example, for both television programs, we knew that we wanted to learn something about the presenters, the candidates, the jury, the content of the show and execution. Each category needs to be operationalized based on tags created during the framework development. An example for the category 'candidates' from *So You Think You Can Dance* is shown in figure 3.

Once this variable is determined, we can apply descriptive quantitative analysis. An example is shown in figure 4, where we have calculated the amount of buzz about the top candidates over time.

We see, for example, that Timor, one of the finalists, evokes the most buzz in the beginning of the live shows. If we compare the buzz from Timor with the buzz of Ivan, the eventual winner of the show, we observe that viewers do not converse so much about Ivan in the beginning of the program, but from live show 6 he overtakes Timor. Similarly, we detect a peak for candidate Gianinni at the moment he needs

Figure 2 – Augmented research model for conducting observational research

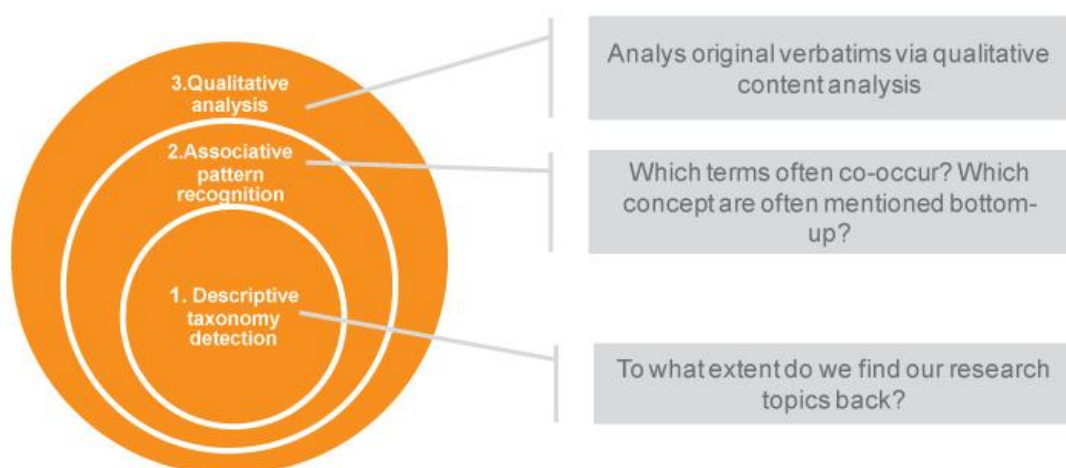
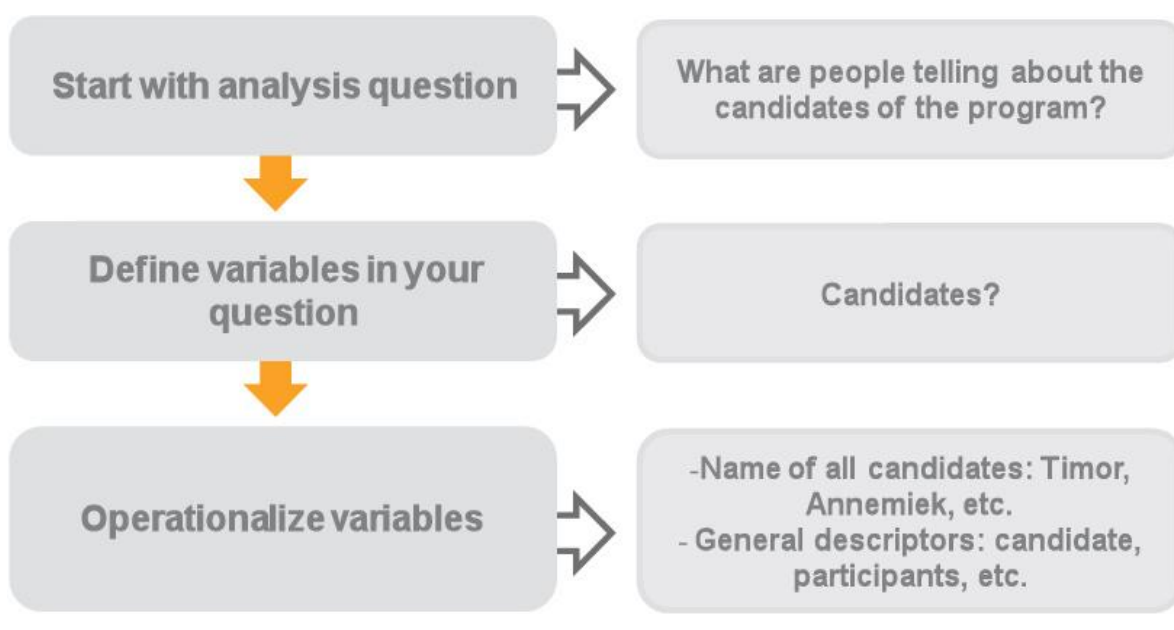


Figure 3 – Example of taxonomy detection from the program *So You Think You Can Dance*



to leave the competition in live show 7.

Layer 2 Associative pattern detection: An additional advantage of text analytics is that it can detect patterns in the data and therefore help the researcher to find themes and links that are not easy to detect by eyeballing or human content analysis. Pattern detection is based on several principles: similarity of word stem, semantically related words, frequently used terms or grouping two terms that often co-occur in the same verbatims.

Layer 3 Qualitative analysis: Taxonomy and pattern detection can help structuring large amounts of information. It is a guide for qualitative researchers to detect important trends. A computer does not have the human skills of interpreting things within a certain context though in order to make the study more actionable, the final step is diving into the original verbatim in order to interpret the context and meaning. In this step social media netnography follows the guidelines of qualitative research. We applied Spiggle’s (1994) methodology for qualitative analysis.

Figure 4 – Example of descriptive quantitative analysis based on social media data

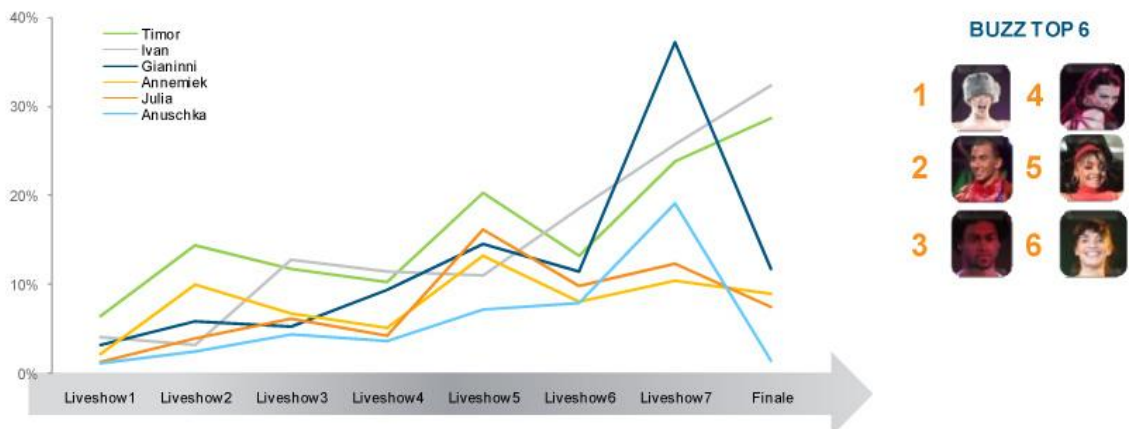
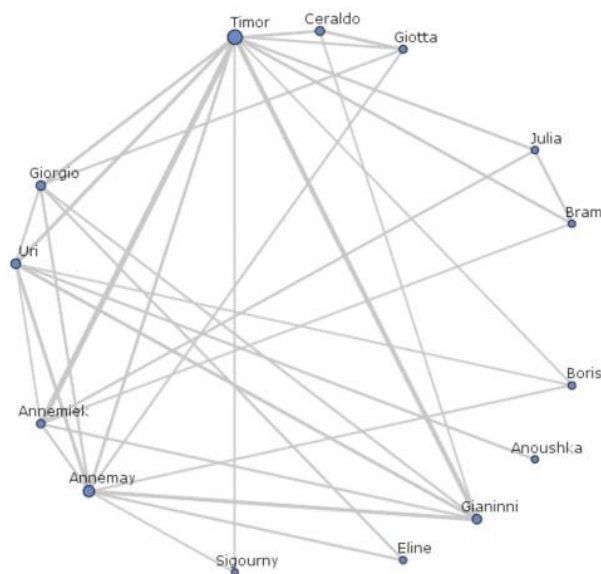


Figure 5 – Example of bridging on the candidates of ‘So You Think You Can Dance’



Abstraction and comparison: Via abstraction, the analyst tries to group the different categories created in the first two steps from the analysis into higher level conceptual constructs. For example, during the analysis of *So You Think You Can Dance*, we encountered several categories that referred to the execution of the program such as camera work, subtitles, binding texts, etc. Based on abstraction, those categories were grouped to create one variable labeled “form”. Comparison involves investigating the different categories for similarities and differences to ensure that the various categories are distinctive.

Dimensionalisation: Decent netnographic analysis goes further than just describing to what extent a certain topic is present in the user-generated-content. Per category, the different information units within this category need to be explored. This is called dimensionalisation. One way to do this specifically for social media netnography is analyzing the different terms that represent a certain category. For *So You Think You Can Dance* we had created a category ‘brands’. In this step of the analysis, we investigate which brands are present in this list and what was said about the different brands.

Bridging: Bridging is studying the interrelationships between the different categories or concepts. An example can be found in figure 5. The thickness of the line indicates to what extent the different candidates in *So You Think You Can Dance* are mentioned together in one single post. Upon further analysis of the data, it became apparent that Timor was the biggest competitor for the different male participants and especially for Gianinni. He also had a strong connection with Annemiek, one of his dance partners in the show. When drilling down into the data, it became clear that many viewers perceived Annemiek and Timor as a perfect dance couple. Another aspect of bridging is omission of relations: a good observer should not only look at what relationships are present but also at the absence of certain relationships. We notice for instance that there is no link between Bram and Boris. These two contestants had a different dancing style and were as such not often considered as competitors.

Breaking: As in quantitative analysis, the different results can be split depending on the profile of the social media source. Are there differences between the different types of social media? Can we observe different themes dependent on the profile of the

poster (if available)? The interpretation of the data based on background variables is called breaking. One specific analysis conducted for RTL Nederland was the comparison of buzz coming from the RTLforum and that originated on other social media. By doing so, we could observe if there was a difference in the themes discussed on the different platforms.

8. Sentiment analysis: a powerful tool to measure attitudes indirectly.

During the course of our research, we never directly interviewed participants about the television shows. In order to have an idea on how good or bad each program was evaluated, we conducted a sentiment analysis. Based on large dictionaries present in the text analytics software, both positive and negative terms were extracted from the verbatim. By crossing the number of positive or negative words with other created categories, we could indirectly estimate the opinion of the viewers about a certain topic. The voting procedure for instance was changed during *So You Think You Can Dance* in the middle of the live shows: in the second half of the program the judgment of the jury was no longer decisive and the viewers could decide themselves by televoting who had to leave the program. By looking at the tonality of the conversations surrounding the topic ‘voting’, we observed an increase in the positive buzz and a decrease in the negative buzz during the second half of the live shows which was an indication that the viewers liked the adaptation of the program format. Through qualitative analysis of the comments, we discovered that the audience liked the new voting procedure because it allowed them to support their favorite candidate.

Main take-aways for RTL Nederland

The learning from the first experiment with *So You Think You Can Dance* was used as input for the evaluation of the program *X Factor*. For *X Factor*, we sped up the process of analysis: the program was broadcast on Friday evening, on Monday we collected the online buzz around the program so the program directors got their evaluation on Wednesday and could still use the feedback for the new show on Friday. Social media netnography can be an interesting methodology for getting insights in a certain topic. The usefulness of a methodology lies however in the value it gives to the end user. This is

what RTL Nederland did with the results of *X Factor* in their day-to-day practice:

For *X factor* a total of 71,230 conversations were scraped from the Internet. This large amount of conversations showed the popularity of the show. Clearly, it was a show viewers wanted to talk about. They were highly involved, especially when it came to their favourite contestant. The viewers had an opinion about everything, ranging from the clothes the presenters were wearing to the comments of the jury, the choreography of the dancers, the singing qualities of the contestants and the entire production of the show. They even appeared to be experts on the position of the camera. Social media netnography lead clearly to a large volume of data that dealt with a broad range of topics relevant to the shows.

Profiling of the candidates

As stated before, one of the main topics of the study were the contestants. The conversations showed insights in the popularity of the different candidates; popular contestants generated more buzz on the Internet. However, a less popular contestant who did something extraordinary was also good for a lot of conversations. A low ranking therefore could be the result of not having a clear profile (and not necessarily be a sign that the concerned contestant was unpopular): who is the person behind the singer? Is he or she funny? Loveable? What are his or her interests? If a viewer does not get to know the person behind the candidate it is more difficult to have an opinion and, in the long run, become a fan of this candidate. One of the candidates of *X factor* had little buzz in the beginning. Qualitative analysis on the conversations gave insights into the reason why: the viewers had no opinion on him; they thought he was neither good nor bad. He was invisible compared to the other contestants even though he was a good singer. After several Live Shows the contestant got a make-over: new clothing style, fashionable glasses and more striking songs to sing and dance. As a result, the contestant changed from low profile to high profile and to be a finalist in the ultimate Live Show.

Music choice

Each Live Show of *X Factor* had a different theme, e.g. 'Motown', 'The Nineties' and 'Go Dutch'. The contestants performed songs in relation to these themes. Each song was chosen by the jury in consultation with the contestants. The study showed that viewers were not always enthusiastic about the

choice of music. Either they did not love the theme or they did like the theme but they disagreed on the chosen songs related to this theme. In order to keep the viewers as involved as possible, changes were made: for the final Live Show viewers had a participation in the choice of songs. Starting a week before the show, they could vote on the *X Factor* Internet site on their favourite song for each finalist, irrespective of the theme. This resulted in a positive buzz on the choice of music.

Cross media channel impact

The results of the study were not only used for adjusting the running show. The output also served as input for other RTL Nederland TVprograms. One of the subjects of the online conversations was the possible affair of a member of the jury and a candidate. Every meaning and every eye blink was scrutinized by the viewers. The RTL Nederland showbiz program *RTL Boulevard* used this alleged relationship as a topic in one of their episodes.

Behind the scenes

Also requests of viewers were taken into account. Several times, viewers mentioned the deficiency of and interest in information and visuals on what happens behind the scenes. What does an *X Factor* day look like for the contestants, before they have to perform in the Live Show? How do they practice? What does a dressing-room look like from the inside? To meet the viewers' needs, the *X Factor* candidates were given a handy cam with the assignment to shoot a regular *X Factor* day. Subsequently, the amateur footage was put on the *X Factor* Internet site for everyone to watch.

Good choice, bad choice

Besides the aforementioned implementation, the study also positively confirmed certain actions that were already taken, for instance, the return of a former contestant in one of the Live Shows. This contestant was sent home just before the start of the Live Shows – not because he could not sing nor because he was unpopular – on the contrary, but because he was quite elderly (78 years old) and therefore probably would not win the *X Factor* competition. However, because of the immense popularity of the contestant among viewers, presenters and jury, it was decided to bring him back in the *X Factor* show one more time. During the first Live Show he gave a live performance on stage which resulted in a standing ovation of the audience. On the

Internet, a great amount of positive buzz was generated on the 'come-back' of the contestant and on RTL Nederland for taking this decision.

In general, without asking questions to participants directly, the feedback study served as a sounding board to verify whether expectations of viewers were met. The richness of the information on social media could definitely serve as inspiration to enrich the program or make adjustments.

The future of social media netnography

The goal of this paper was to introduce a new research field called social media netnography. Making use of spontaneous user-generated-content is a new field in online market research. With the case study of *So You Think You Can Dance* and *X Factor*, we demonstrated how we can apply this research design within media research. There are, however, multiple other applications in market research one can think of: it can be used to assess the online brand positioning of your brand against its competitors. Because of the possibilities to let the data speak for itself, it is a valuable tool for generating market insights mentioned about certain themes or by certain target groups. It can be used for evaluating a communication campaign, to follow up the launch of a new product, to dive into customer satisfaction and adapt communication to people's day to day vocabulary.

Although there are even more applications, we also need to mention that it is not applicable for answering all research questions and to make the point that social media netnography has its shortcomings. It is important before even setting up a netnographic study to do a feasibility check: it may very well happen that it is hard to find sufficient and rich conversations about certain (low-involvement) topics. Moreover, it is hard to get a good estimation of the profile of people who are posting the online comments about a certain subject. Despite the vast amount of data, there is coverage error and profiling remains difficult which makes it not feasible to draw a representative picture for a certain population.

Social media research netnography is best not considered as a standalone method. In line with other observational research, it delivers the best results when it is combined with other data collection

methods. One example is the usage of auto driving sessions (Grant, 2006). Auto driving sessions are generally qualitative discussions (focus groups or interviews) where the results of the observational studies are fed back to the participants so they can give their feedback and enrich the final report.

Social media research is one of the fastest-evolving types of research. This also implies that some of these guidelines and methods may change in the future. Especially in the field of passive data collection, we recently see a lot of activity: on the one hand, new panel providers emerge solely to sell data that are not collected by actively interviewing research participants but are collected based on observation. And on the other hand, there is increased attention to ethical guidelines for this type of research to better protect the privacy of consumers. Social media research is also not exclusively the domain of market researchers: PR agencies and advertising companies are also providing services in interpreting social media data and might therefore also help to shape or to endanger this new research paradigm.

Finally, it is not only the guidelines for conducting social media netnography that will evolve: the new consumer is more empowered and will increasingly use social media to give feedback to companies and brands. This implies that internal marketing and customer insights departments and perhaps entire organisations will need to be more tuned to this new way of communication. The market researchers of the future will not only have to excel in *asking* but they will need to excel in *listening*. We hope this case on social media netnography has helped to make a first step in that direction!

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