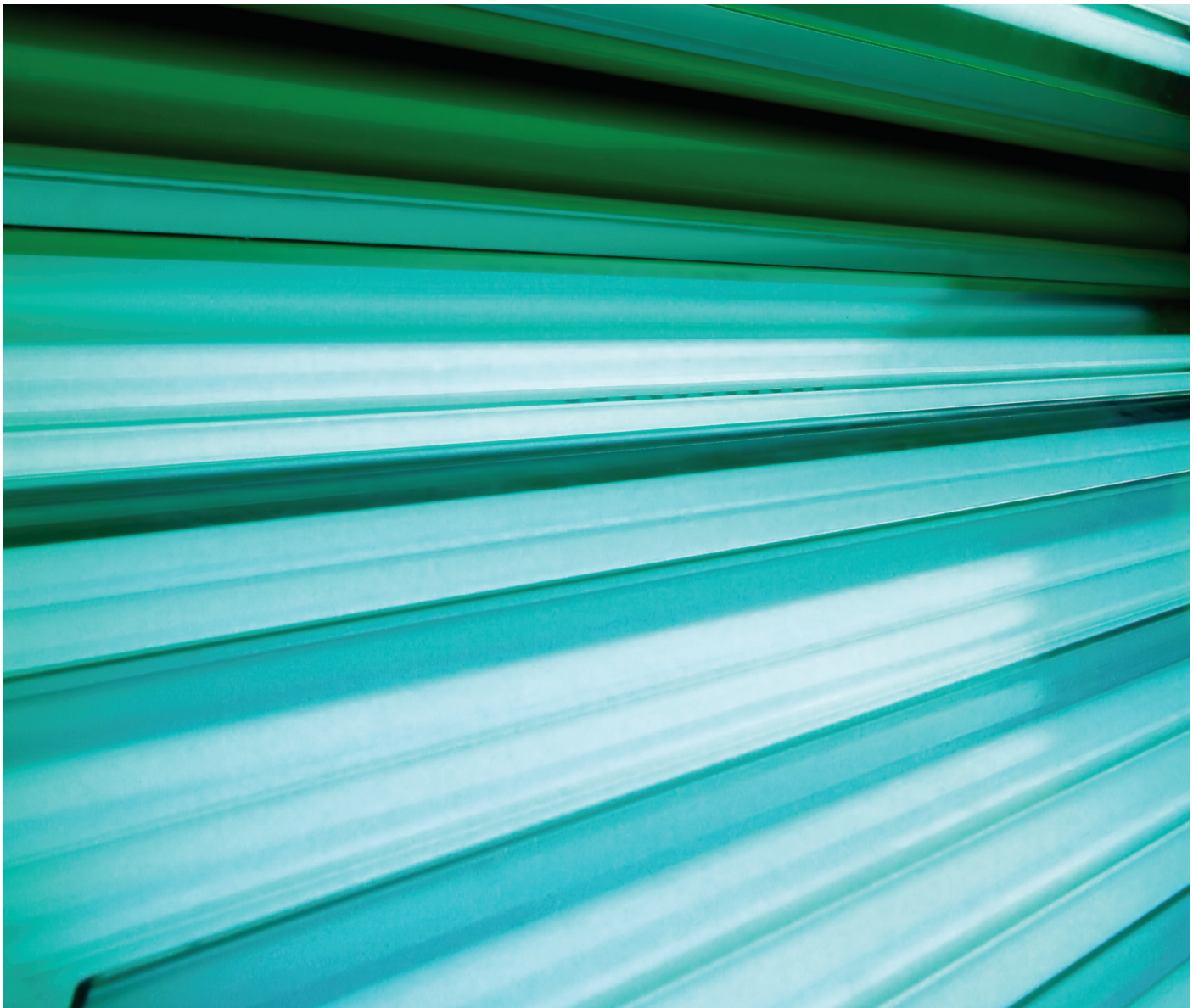


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# NETNOGRAPHY FOR INNOVATION

*Listening in on web conversations opens up a whole new way to explore new products. Here are some exciting insights from the cosmetics industry.*



**N**etnography is the linguistic blend of internet and ethnography, a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that uses internet-optimised ethnographic research techniques to study the social context in online communities. This approach helps researchers to listen in on web conversations to learn about what actually drives consumers and to understand the inner nature of consumer behaviour.

Figure 1 illustrates the five methodological steps of netnography, showcased in the field of cosmetics where our challenge was to reveal new consumer insights in the fast-growing area of sunless tanning products and to find genuine consumer answers to these research questions:

- What are the triggers and the barriers for consumers to enter the category of sunless tanning?
- What are the daily rituals and habits for (cross) usage of self-tanning products, face and body care products, moisturising products, make-up products?
- What problems do consumers have with sunless tanning products and where would they like to see major improvement?

### CONSUMER TRIBES

Overall 437 communities speaking five different languages within the fields of beauty and care, fashion and lifestyle, health, shopping and Q&As were identified as relevant internet sources for consumer discussions about sunless tanning.

Self tanning is a hot topic in fields such as body building. Body-builders have high tanning requirements, and when preparing for contests, community members exchange very detailed experiences and procedures for applying tanning products. To focus on a relevant set of community content, a thorough selection process was applied and six communities were included in the empathic in-depth analysis.

A different type of user prevails within other tanning communities and therefore further analysis should take into account that different communities make up different consumer tribes (ie groups of people who share a common passion which bonds them together through a shared sense of belonging). Figure 2 shows the user avatars of the consumer tribes of the 'IamTAN' and the 'BodyXtreme' communities.

Online communities are seldom representative of an already-defined target group, but as netnography is an exploratory research approach, the focus is on revealing undiscovered consumer needs, product ideas and potential fields for growth and innovation rather than assessing representativeness. Complementary quantitative research builds on consumer insights whereas observing the conversation in passionate consumer tribes helps generate relevant questions for the broader mass of consumers.

### WHAT ARE 'RACCOON EYES'?

During the immersion process, the researcher becomes sensitised to the community members' attitudes who typically develop their own language. For instance, members of sunless tanning communities talk about 'raccoon eyes' in discussing their experiences:

"I think that I have the worst raccoon eyes in the world. Everyone at the gym I work at has let me know that my eyes

## METHODOLOGICAL STEPS OF NETNOGRAPHY



are really white [...] You gotta wear the goggles when you use a tanning bed so I think the best solution unfortunately would be to use sunless tanner.” (Source: iamtan.com; skinni\_mini)

Although software-enhanced search functions may help to identify posts with certain key words, they cannot accurately distinguish between valuable and irrelevant content. At this stage the researcher’s knowledge about content analysis, qualitative data analysis and discourse analysis is incorporated.

### FROM DIALOGUE TO INSIGHTS

The netnography on sunless tanning led to a category system of 825 codes applied to 3,128 consumer statements retrieved from the selected online communities. Generally multiple codes were assigned to each consumer statement. A central step is to look for patterns and relationships within and across the collections of consumer statements. The researcher compares and contrasts the consumer records to discover similarities and differences, build typologies, or find sequences. The sunless tanning project led to nine distinctive consumer insights, one of which aggregates perceived problems with sunless tanning products.

The next quote is one of more than 1,500 consumer statements referring to this insight:

“DO NOT BUY THAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!! that is, if your talking about the tanning gun, ive seen it at walgreens. i tried it, it came out streaky, my feet were orange for 10 days and my whole body was orange it was sooo splotchy, doesn’t stick in certain places. And it turned my armpits green!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! not even kidding. they were green like normal green colored. that only lasted for 4 days (o lucky me). so yeah thats my advice.” (Source: sunless.com; Felistia)

A curse for many tanning maniacs is the frustration about bad experiences with the unpredictable effects of many products and the urge to get rid of flawed tan results. This is the disastrous downside of sunless tanning, expressed by users in hundreds of statements:

“MY GOD!!!!!!!!!! THIS SOOOOOOOOOO HAPPENED TO ME!!!! i absalutely HATE the jergens natural glow now. my neck was sooo blotchy and my dad told me i looked like i had a skin disease!!!!!!!!!! i scrubbed and scrubbed at my neck with a lufa until my skin was red but the blotches still wouldnt come off!!! i ALSO have the jergens natural glow for the face(which was the biggest waste of money) because ya! i would apply it before i went to bed and the next morning-NOTHING!! it didnt even work and it stunk horribly and gave me a stuffy nose!! i will NEVER use this line again!!!!!!!!” (Source: iamtan.com; TanSweet)

### PRODUCT PIONEERS

A further insight referred to a user group which perceives sunless tanning as a lifestyle. They show high identification with the products, are highly motivated, engage in helping others, give advice and spend a lot of time keeping up-to-date. These characteristics make them a valuable resource as product pioneer and lead user. One representative of that group said the following:

“But there are a number of factors in a lotion that can effect the DHA development, way to many to list here. :) If you

look on the website <http://www.makingcosmetics.com> they have some recipes for sunless tanners, which I believe list the amounts of DHA needed per amount of lotion base. Also just typing “Sunless Tanning Recipes” in Google will bring up many message boards where ppl make their own, and share recipies. You can also dissolve the DHA into distilled water, at the appropriate ratio, for the percentage needed, and add that to your lotion, which is what the LL Method does. (see recipes on the FAQ board on the main lavender board)” (Source: sunless.com; VickyII/III)

### ACTING ON THE INSIGHTS

Transferring the insights into innovative product and service solutions is a crucial step requiring an integrated perspective that combines the creativity and product expertise of design experts with the business know-how and analytical skills of market researchers.

The team of researchers and designers developed four innovative product solutions and prototypes in sunless tanning in response to the insights collected.

A key benefit of netnography is the possibility to access unfiltered, unbiased information from highly experienced and involved users. The huge number of conversations and the vivid online dialogue about products and brands enable marketing and innovation managers to obtain deep insights into consumers’ everyday problems and their solutions.

To ensure that the ideas and opinions are not only valid within the community, but also reflected in the larger target group, complementary quantitative market research should be applied.

### THE FUTURE

Automated quantitative analysis has been attempted because of the huge amounts of consumer online statements available for nearly every consumer product field. Numerous market research institutes and tech companies crawl the internet for relevant content and analyse it via frequency counting and natural language processing algorithms. But whilst these automated tools generate numbers and graphs, the underlying original statements in the ‘voice of the customer’ either disappear or are not aggregated in such a way to support decision-making, especially in the field of innovation which generally is linked with high follow-up investment.

There is huge potential for IT support to make netnography more efficient but this approach still relies mainly on the researcher’s capabilities. The future aim is not to fully automate the process, but rather to maintain and emphasise the qualitative nature of the method. **RW**

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