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From “participant” to “friend”: the role of Facebook engagement in ethnographic research

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From “participant” to “friend”: the role of Facebook engagement in ethnographic research

Introduction

Engaging with participants on Facebook during ethnographic fieldwork has become increasingly prevalent in research, especially when exploring complex and sensitive consumption issues (Chenail, 2011; Piacenti et al., 2014). Such engagement not only provides a complementary medium of communication but also provides a context and a source of data from which emic and etic interpretations can be made (Baker, 2013; Dogruer et al., 2011).

Despite, extant literature focuses predominantly on “how-to” aspects of integrating Facebook in ethnographic research (Baker, 2013), thus, creating a need to ameliorate epistemological and methodological issues of integrating Facebook in ethnographic research. For example, further research can help ethnographic researchers to understand the ways in which Facebook, as a methodological tool in ethnographic research, can encourage close rapport with participants leading to rich and thick interpretations of complex phenomena.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to theorise epistemological and methodological implications of integrating Facebook in conventional ethnographic research. Accordingly, we present three research questions. Firstly, how to engage with participants on their Facebook profiles to build a productive rapport with them during ethnographic fieldwork? Building on friendship theories (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillmann-Healy, 2003), we suggest that Facebook engagement encourages rapport building by enabling researchers to gradually develop dialogical researcher-participant relationships by paying close attention to aspects such as practice, pace, context, and the ‘ethics of friendships’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Secondly, what challenges inherent to conventional ethnographic research does increased rapport enable researchers to overcome? We propose that Facebook helps overcome three challenges inherent to conventional ethnography: 1) negotiating access and immersion, 2) developing multiple perspectives, and 3) providing rich and thick interpretations. Thirdly, how Facebook engagement enables the navigation of these challenges? Our findings contribute to consumer and cross disciplinary ethnographic literature (Baker, 2013; Piacenti et al., 2014) and provide evidence that utilising Facebook allows researchers to overcome such challenges by expanding the researcher’s field, improving participants’ trust and confidence of the researcher, bringing both insider and outsider perspectives, and diluting the power hierarchy often found in participant-researcher relationships.

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3 However, we also propose that our contributions have implications beyond conventional
4 ethnography and are relevant to wider netnographic (Kozinets, 2010; 2015) and social media-
5 oriented ethnographic research (Postill and Pink, 2012). Our proposed framework could be
6 useful for netnographic researchers seeking to build a close rapport with participants as it
7 sheds light on epistemological and methodological issues about one of the popular social
8 networking sites that provides, as Kozinets (2015, p. 35) classifies, a “hyving social
9 experience”. In addition, we also contribute to an emerging body of cross-disciplinary
10 literature on “friendship as method” (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014; Ellis, 2007; Glesne,
11 1989; Tillmann-Healy, 2003) by theorising the role of Facebook engagement in inspiring and
12 sustaining ‘friendships’ with participants during ethnographic research.
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21 We have structured the paper as follows: Firstly, we engage with cross-disciplinary literature
22 on ethnography, netnography, theories of friendship, and Facebook. Secondly, we introduce
23 the research methodology, and the overarching ethnographic research process. Thirdly, we
24 draw from our ethnographic fieldwork to illustrate how integrating Facebook facilitates
25 friendships with participants and allows us to investigate deeper and richer details of their
26 everyday lived experiences during important transitions, in our case, the transition from
27 single to marital status. Finally, we discuss some of the important ethical/moral implications
28 of “friendship as method” and the complexities of integrating Facebook in ethnographic
29 research and elaborate on the ways in which we addressed such complexities.
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38 **Literature**

39 *Ethnographic research, theories of friendship, and the role of Facebook*

40 Having its origins in cultural anthropology (Boas, 1920; Malinowski, 1922; Mead and Boas,
41 1928), ethnography is increasingly being accepted as a rigorous research approach useful to
42 commercial (Boddy, 2011; Wägar, 2012), public policy making (Arnould, 2001; Mosse,
43 2006), and marketing research (Arnould and Price, 2006; Harvey and Myers, 1995).
44 Expecting to “clarify the ways culture simultaneously constructs and is formulated by
45 people’s behaviours and experiences” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p.485), ethnography is
46 capable of exploring mundane (Miller, 2008), private (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995),
47 sensitive (Hill, 1991), and marginalised (Kates, 2002) consumer experiences.
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56 Contemporary consumers continuously traverse online and offline contexts in their
57 consumption and identity pursuits (Kozinets, 2015; Piacenti et al., 2014). Consequently, this
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3 has resulted in the extending of boundaries of conventional ethnographic approaches. In
4 response, netnographic (Kozinets, 2010; 2015), virtual (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Hine,
5 2000), and social media (Postill and Pink, 2012) ethnographic approaches have become
6 increasingly popular in consumer research. Netnography, in particular, is increasingly
7 adopted by interpretive researchers to investigate and explore online cultures and
8 communities (Kozinets, 2015). Current research pays extensive attention to understanding
9 various online cultures and discusses methods that are used to examine different aspects of
10 these online contexts (Chenail, 2011; Postill and Pink, 2012; Wali, 2010). However, there is
11 lack of depth in online ethnographic research covering epistemological and methodological
12 implications of engaging with different communities. For example, even though the
13 intermittent interactions and observations prevalent in social media sites such as Facebook
14 seem an obvious and common sense context for netnographic researchers, we have limited
15 understanding of the actual processes involved and, especially, of how Facebook allows
16 researchers to become sensitised to understanding new consumption experiences coalescing
17 in both online and offline spheres.

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30 Categorised as a platform that provides a “hyving social experience” (Kozinets, 2015), over a
31 billion registered users (Toma and Hancock, 2013) engage on Facebook to meet two basic
32 online/offline social needs: 1) the need for belonging (Seidman, 2013) and, 2) the need for
33 self-expression (Dogruer et al., 2011). There is an extensive body of literature discussing how
34 semi-public Facebook profiles provide an interface for people to link online and offline
35 identities (Postill and Pink, 2012) by expressing feelings and emotions (Al-Saggaf, 2011),
36 share personalities (Zhao et al., 2008), discuss routine experiences (Moore and McElroy,
37 2012), seek self-assurance and emotional support (Ross et al., 2009), and enhance a sense of
38 self-worth and integrity (Toma and Hancock, 2013). In addition, Facebook not only
39 facilitates connecting people with similar interests (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012) but also
40 enables maintaining of offline social relationships in the online sphere (Ellison et al., 2007;
41 Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010) by letting people to track changes in their friends’ lives (Nadkarni
42 and Hofmann, 2012) and uploading moments from their own lives (Al-Saggaf, 2011).
43 Researchers across disciplines have increasingly used Facebook as a qualitative research tool
44 to aid sampling, data collection, and participant engagement and retention (Baltar and Brunet,
45 2012; Gregori and Baltar, 2013; Mychasiuk and Benzies, 2012). For example, Piacenti et al.
46 (2014, p. 226-227) acknowledge that Facebook has the capacity to expand the ethnographic
47 researcher’s “field” and introduce new ontological and epistemological dimensions of
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3 online/offline consumer experiences. In addition, it not only provides a supplementary
4 medium of communication for online and traditional ethnographic research (Langer and
5 Beckman, 2005; Garcia et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2010; 2015) but also brings a rich context and
6 source of data (Baker, 2013) for researchers to build a close rapport/relationship with
7 participants (Dogruer et al., 2011; Moore and McElroy, 2012; Seidman, 2013). However,
8 extant research does not discuss how Facebook and other social media platforms enable
9 researchers' immersion in participants' lives and help them better understand intricate and
10 intimate consumption experiences linked to their online and offline identity pursuits. Thus, as
11 Kozinets (2015, p. 6) points out, current literature will benefit from an epistemological and
12 methodological debate on various approaches and tools used within online ethnographic
13 research.
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23 As suggested in some of the seminal ethnographic work (Belk et al., 1988; Malinowski,
24 1922; Mead and Boas, 1928; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), developing a strong rapport
25 with participants is integral to developing relationships that may enable rich ethnographic
26 interpretation. Therefore, seeking to build close emotional bonds (Miller, 2008), and, in some
27 cases, lasting friendships with participants (Edirisingha et al., 2014), is intuitive to most
28 ethnographers as they look to understand deeper cultural meanings which are not usually
29 visible in more superficial responses (Crowley, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).
30 Similarly, aiming to understand various online cultural phenomena, netnographic researchers
31 also suggest the importance of strong relationships with participants which are built upon
32 trust, confidentiality, and respect (Kozinets, 2002; 2006; 2010; Langer and Beckman, 2005;
33 Rokka, 2010). Though, most extant ethnographic and netnographic studies advise
34 maintaining a scholarly distance from participants (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and
35 avoiding friendships that negatively influence researcher objectivity (Glesne, 1989; Labaree,
36 2002), there is a concomitant emergence of advice that promotes the importance of
37 developing close "friendships" with participants, especially when exploring complex socio-
38 cultural phenomena (Glesne, 1989; Tillmann-Healy, 2003).
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51 References to friendship within ethnographic research appear across disciplines (Allen-
52 Collinson, 2014; Christie, 2015; Edirisingha et al., 2014; 2015; Fiske, 1991; Higgins, 1996;
53 Tillmann-Healy, 2003) where it is recognised as a meaningful and desirable bonding activity
54 between humans that also has implications for their personal wellbeing (Adams and Kurtis,
55 2015; Antonio, 2001; Caroline, 1993; Gomez, 2014; Tesch et al., 1981). Importantly,
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3 friendship is an inter-dependent and mutually negotiated attachment (Buote et al., 2009) that
4 is embedded and enacted within the normality of everyday social engagements (Buhrmester,
5 1996). There is also consensus in this literature which recognises the importance of love,
6 caring, trust, empathy, confidentiality, respect, and support as essential traits of friendships
7 (Mackinlay and Bartleet, 2012; Sassi and Thomas, 2012; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Online
8 interfaces are also increasingly important in the establishment and maintenance of
9 contemporary friendships (Jiali, 2007). Regardless, there are important contextual and
10 situational differences between friendships that are situated in online and offline
11 environments (Adam and Kurtis, 2015; Leeuw et al., 2012), which make some research
12 contexts and topics inaccessible through online spheres (Langer and Beckman, 2005). In
13 addition, the purpose of online friendships is not always the pursuit of social interaction but
14 can encompass a range of other motives such as knowledge production and dissemination
15 (Kozinets, 2015). Researchers have observed that online friendships tend to be temporal as
16 people are less inter-dependent and committed in online friendships (Chan and Cheng, 2004).
17 Similarly, attachment people are willing to embrace (Buote et al., 2009) and the type of
18 behaviours they perceive as trustworthy also differ significantly across online and offline
19 friendships (Henderson and Gilding, 2004).
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33 In addition, there is a growing body of ethnographic literature that promotes “friendship as
34 method” (Ellis, 2007; Glesne, 1989; González-López, 2010; Leeuw et al., 2012; Owton and
35 Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillmann-Healy, 2003) as a useful methodological approach. Building
36 close friendships with participants allows ethnographers to shift between insider and outsider
37 perspectives (Browne, 2003) and ones which can produce trust, commitment and engagement
38 at a more personal level within the researcher-participant relationship (Ellis, 2007; Fine,
39 1994; Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Increased trust and rapport
40 between the researcher and participants ease participants into sharing more intimate and
41 personal details that are otherwise concealed from outsiders (Mazzei and O'Brien, 2009;
42 Taylor, 2011). For example, as suggested in some feminist studies, befriending participants
43 lead to increased levels of enthusiasm and corroboration by the participants (Kirsch, 2005;
44 Stacey, 1988; Taylor, 2011; Wheatley, 1994) and also increased the researcher’s own
45 capacity to empathise with and develop an understanding of intricate cultural cues concealed
46 in mundane consumer experiences (Edirisingha et al., 2015).
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3 Despite this growing interest across disciplines, there is much to learn about the
4 methodological implications of seeking to build friendships, especially during consumer-
5 oriented ethnographic research (Edirisingha et al., 2015). Particularly, an in-depth
6 understanding of different research tools capable of initiating and sustaining friendships
7 during ethnographic research would help researchers to navigate inherent challenges of the
8 approach, such as gaining access, building trust, and sustaining immersion (Arnould and
9 Wallendorf, 1994). In addition, a better methodological conceptualisation is needed to
10 understand potential applications of friendship as method and the sorts of mundane insights it
11 might help to reveal during ethnographic fieldwork. To address these gaps, we build on
12 methodological foundations of “friendship as method” discussed by Tillmann-Healy (2003)
13 and others (Ellis, 2007; Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tesch et al., 1981). We present
14 evidence from fieldwork upon which we theorise how Facebook can be used to enrich
15 conventional ethnographic research by aiding the initiation, maintenance, and the
16 development of a close rapport with research participants.
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28 **Research Context and Methodology:**

29 Adopting a multi-method, longitudinal, and two-staged ethnographic research process we
30 explored identity interplay and re-formation in new family households. Investigating topics in
31 identity formation and its negotiation has been a challenging topic across disciplines,
32 especially in the context of family (Epp and Velagaleti, 2014; Fiese et al., 2006). Family
33 identity negotiation during transitions evolve over a period of time in confined spaces of
34 home through negotiations of mundane and cherished family possessions (Curasi, 2006;
35 Curasi et al., 2004; Miller, 2008; 2010). Consequently, our ethnographic research explored
36 new family lived experiences and identity negotiations during family formation.
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44 We selected a purposive sample of nine Sinhalese Sri Lankan families by drawing from the
45 first author’s personal network (Hoffman, 1980). In so doing we intended to overcome
46 difficulties of recruitment and issues relating to building participant trust. Even though prior
47 acquaintances were useful in revealing individual expectations of marriage and provided
48 deeper insight into personal reflexions of family formation, they did not provide access to or
49 immersion in mundane family life. Accordingly, we recognised the importance of building a
50 strong rapport and encouraging friendly relationships with participants (Tillmann-Healy,
51 2003).
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3 When we discuss forming friendships with participants, we refer to taking a “stance of
4 friendship” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735), rather than merely aiming to develop
5 strategically guised relationships to gain access to the private lives of participants. We
6 specifically aimed to build and sustain lasting friendships that bridge online and offline
7 contexts through casual conversations and everyday involvement (Owton and Allen-
8 Collinson, 2014). We paid close attention to normative practices, pace, and morals of
9 friendship (Ellis, 2007; Tillmann-Healy, 2003) in order to create dialogical-based and
10 emotionally genuine relationships (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014).
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18 We also adapted the ethnographic research process throughout data collection (Edirisingha et
19 al. 2014) and used multiple methods including casual conversations, Facebook engagement,
20 and various elicitation tasks to facilitate emerging friendships. As we illustrate in this study,
21 closer friendships with participants gradually emerged during Facebook interactions and
22 provided us with a rather unanticipated source of data. In addition, the first author’s
23 familiarity with Sri Lankan customs, values, and traditions provided a useful emic
24 perspective (Asselin, 2003; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) during data collection and
25 interpretation. However, it is important to distinguish this approach of seeking to build close
26 friendships with participants through Facebook engagement to negotiating access with
27 participants in netnographic research. We were not seeking to build online Facebook
28 friendships as we had already met our participants offline and our friendships continued to
29 progress through offline ethnographic fieldwork. Facebook provided us with a useful
30 platform to engage with participants and foster our friendships that last beyond the research
31 project and which traverse online and offline environments. Nonetheless, we suggest
32 netnographic researchers could benefit from our detailed theoretical conceptualisation of how
33 taking a friendship as method approach could help them overcome issues of immersion and
34 access.
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47 Our two-staged ethnographic research process lasted over two and half years and explored
48 mundane consumption practices such as family sharing (Belk, 2010), acts of mutual
49 reciprocity (Arnould and Rose, 2015), and gift-giving (Sherry, 1983). Specifically, we
50 examined activities such as: family meal preparation, grocery shopping, displaying of
51 furniture, and the negotiation of inter-family relationships. The data collection combined a
52 range of tools including video recorded participant observations, semi-structured in-depth
53 interviews, informal sessions, and social-media engagement. During the initial stages of the
54 research, Facebook interaction aimed at introducing the research project to the participants,
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3 however, as the research progressed Facebook conversations (chat) and observations
4 (timeline observations) became an increasingly rich source of data that complemented more
5 conventional tools.
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9 We discussed the multi-method and adaptive nature of our ethnography with participants
10 during the first meetings. It was at this stage that we invited participants to become Facebook
11 friends; however, it was primarily to stay in touch (Baker, 2013) and to discuss research
12 specifics such as arranging interviews and observation sessions. As we further discuss in the
13 next section, participants frequently engaged through Facebook creating a rich seam of
14 insight into their personal lives. For example, passive timeline observations enabled us to
15 understand subtle changes and details of participants' lives on a regular basis. It brought an
16 unanticipated but rewarding opportunity to gradually build friendships with our participants,
17 thus, enhancing trust in the researcher-participant relationship. Therefore, we sought separate
18 permission from participants to consider Facebook material such as chat histories, pictures,
19 and status updates in data analysis and interpretation building.
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28 **Discussion**

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31 This section draws from the findings of our two and half year ethnography to illustrate the
32 ways in which Facebook engagement becomes useful to develop friendships with participants
33 and produce material for researchers to draw "rich" and "thick" interpretations to
34 conventional ethnographic research. Specifically, we address three challenges of traditional
35 ethnography that could be negotiated by integrating Facebook as one of the research tools
36 (Figure 1.1): 1) negotiating access and immersion, 2) developing multiple perspectives, and
37 3) building rich and thick interpretations.
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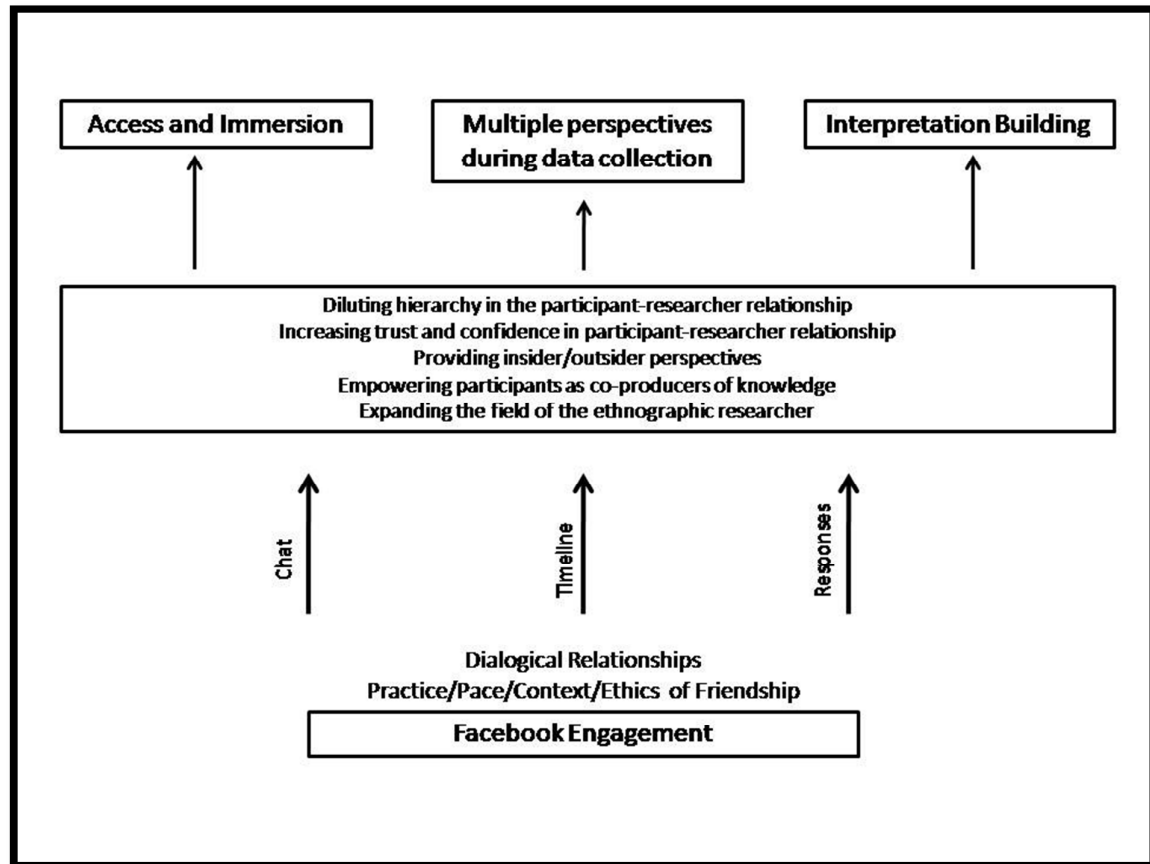


Figure 1.1: Framework of role of Facebook engagement in ethnographic research

Gaining access and sustaining longitudinal immersion

Here we discuss how Facebook allows access to and immersion in informants' everyday lives and help develop rich and thick interpretations. We argue that using Facebook can complement traditional ethnographic methods by enhancing trust and confidence in the participant-researcher relationship.

Integrating Facebook in our adaptive ethnographic research process allowed us to gain closer access to participant families and also enabled deeper immersion in their mundane lives. Negotiating initial access involved conducting first meetings with participants and learning about their everyday lives. We used Facebook to introduce the research when the first author's physical presence was impractical. Adhering to normative practices and respecting the pace of friendship development (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), our preliminary conversations covered casual topics about participants' families, occupations, lifestyles, and hobbies as we would normally do when we first meet someone. We occasionally "liked" participants' Facebook postings and left "comments" for their timeline updates (such as picture, video, and

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3 status updates), which was also normative for Facebook ‘friends’. It also provided a way of
4 making them aware of our presence and conveying our genuine and continuing interest in
5 their lives. Thus, adopting Facebook in the research process provided us with a casual way of
6 introducing the research in an environment that is already familiar to participants. It helped us
7 gradually build trust through practices which are normative to conventional offline
8 friendships by allowing sufficient time for friendships to evolve through mundane interaction
9 (Tillmann-Healy, 2003).
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15 One of the most challenging tasks of our ethnography was to remain fully immersed in
16 participants’ lives during data collection. Especially, it was not practical to observe everyday
17 consumption practices when the first author was not living in Sri Lanka. There were also
18 changes in participants’ family circumstances, such as getting a new job and moving away to
19 a town where frequent research visits were impractical. In such circumstance we used
20 Facebook as a communication medium (Piacenti et al., 2014) to access their otherwise
21 inaccessible lives.
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28 We also used Facebook chat during on-going fieldwork to catch up with participants, to
29 discuss emerging themes, and to arrange future data collection sessions. These informal
30 conversations occurred during multiple time points whenever the participants were available
31 online and free to engage, another example of respecting the pace of conventional friendships
32 develop over time. We discussed a range of topics such as about their material possessions,
33 relationships, lifestyles, and family issues. Also, keeping track of participants’ Facebook
34 updates and other interactions such as shared posts and conversation threads helped us to
35 observe changes in aspects relevant to family identity negotiation. There were also occasions
36 when participants shared details about mundane and everyday practices on their Facebook
37 timelines. This expanded our field as ethnographic researchers by enabling us to access
38 participants’ everyday lives at a more personal level and to create an immersive experience
39 than we would be able to by using conventional observation methods. For example, during
40 Facebook chats our participants shared details about what they were doing on a specific day
41 such as how they assigned specific household duties, thus, providing us with a real-time
42 access to mundane family practices (Baker, 2013):
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55 *“In the morning we cleaned up the house, mostly I did the cleaning and he kept*
56 *complaining...We are making Chinese rolls...He is helping me...” – Shani (Female) during*
57 *Facebook chat*
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3 As the research progressed, some participants took an interest in the first author's personal
4 life and started 'liking' and 'commenting' on his personal Facebook postings. This
5 encouraged a friendlier and more reciprocal relationship between the first author and some of
6 the participants based on their shared interests and lifestyles. It also enabled us to develop a
7 more "dialogical" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) participant-researcher relationship adhering to the
8 ethics, practices, and pace of conventional friendships. For example, one of our female
9 participants joined the research project because of her husband's close relationship with the
10 first author's family. Initially we felt that she was reluctant to talk about her new family
11 relationships such as with in-laws. However, she started to engage often on Facebook by
12 "liking" and "commenting" on the first author's Facebook postings, thus, leading to a closer
13 friendship based on shared hobbies and interests. She eventually became more comfortable
14 with discussing deeper and more personal topics, but we were also careful not to probe too
15 much on Facebook. We normally let the participants set the duration and frequency of such
16 intimate conversations. Often it took several lengthy conversations to develop rapport and to
17 be able to discuss particularly sensitive family issues underlying family conflict and tension,
18 as it would with conventional friendship development. As we discuss later relating to ethical
19 implications, letting participants set the pace helped us overcome potential ethical and moral
20 pitfalls such as being too intrusive.
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34 Facebook also enables researchers to be perceived as "ordinary people" with families and
35 hobbies rather than as objective researchers who disappear after the desired data saturation is
36 achieved. Just as it helps learning about participants' lives through their profiles, Facebook
37 also provides a foray into the researcher's (first author's) own personal life. As Chamal, one
38 of the male informants explained, having a Facebook account where he could "*see the first*
39 *author's personal life, interests and family*" helped perceiving him as a more "*real individual*
40 *with genuine interests*". It enabled Chamal to feel more comfortable in inviting the first
41 author into his home and discussing his personal family matters.
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48 The friendships gradually evolved over time as the research progressed and contributed to
49 removing the traditional hierarchy in the participant-researcher relationship. Some of the
50 families became close friends with the first author's family during the research process. As a
51 result of the increased levels of trust and confidence they contributed to co-constructing
52 ethnographic knowledge by suggesting various consumption occasions and methods to
53 capture "rich" and "deep" insight. For example, another male participant, Sohan, asked the
54 first author to join their evening meals in order to help him better understand how they
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3 “managed their relationship with the parents” and how they “dealt with members of the
4 extended family”. This provided us with a useful context to capture layered family
5 interactions relating to their family structure and generational orientation, which are essential
6 components of family identity (Epp and Price, 2008).
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9 10 ***Developing multiple perspectives***

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12 Much of the richness in ethnographic research is rendered from acknowledging the
13 coexistence of divergent perspectives identified in data, particularly, that gathered using
14 multiple methods (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Both redundancy and variety in the data
15 are needed to capture vivid representations of lived experiences and to develop a critical
16 perspective to such emic understanding by developing deep etic interpretations (Arnould and
17 Wallendorf, 1994). In this section we argue that Facebook chat, timeline observations, and
18 responses to posts complement other traditional ethnographic methods such as in-depth
19 interviews, participant observations, and casual conversations, thus, providing an additional
20 layer of perspectives from which to understand participants’ everyday lived experiences.
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24 Facebook chat improves the researcher’s ability to access useful “perspectives of action”
25 while timeline observations produce powerful “perspectives in action” (Baker, 2013) of
26 everyday family practices, routines, and conventions. Observing Facebook activities such as
27 how participants share posts, what they share and how they respond to comments in their
28 timelines expand the researcher’s field by providing insight into participants’ lives such as
29 weekend routines and the complex yet temporal emotions that underpin mundane activities
30 that may go unnoticed during interviews or planned observations. Such Facebook
31 engagement also enables a continuous immersion in participants’ lives and increases the
32 opportunities for identifying potentially revelatory moments (Trigger et al., 2012). Both
33 Facebook chat and timeline observations are useful when exploring sensitive and mundane
34 experiences around new family tension and conflict.
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38 There are also occasions that participants cannot discuss changes in their lives because they
39 are embedded within the normalcy of everyday lives and are too subtle for them to recognise.
40 Also, in some situations they are rather undesirable changes which they do not want to share
41 with outsiders. Therefore, participants either do not realise such changes are actually taking
42 place in their lives, simply fail to recall those moments, or try to deliberately conceal those
43 from outsiders. However, developing trust and confidence through Facebook friendships
44 bring an insider perspective, thus, making the changes to mundane routines and practices
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3 become more visible on timelines through postings of pictures and status updates. Using such
4 material as prompts during subsequent ethnographic sessions can enable the exploration of
5 the complex emotions that underpin mundane consumer behaviours, adding another layer of
6 rich insight.
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10 In addition, dialogical interactions on Facebook chat reveal routine details about participants'
11 everyday lives such as their mundane family practices, which are difficult to obtain through
12 traditional in-depth interviews and planned participant observations. Frequent catch ups on
13 Facebook chat helps staying current on changes such as adjustments in family practices,
14 family structure, inter-generational values, and developments of family relationships. For
15 example, Haran (male) often revealed mundane details of their lives:
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21 *“She (wife) usually wakes up before I do and prepares lunch for us to take. I wake up slowly*
22 *and take almost an hour to finish the tea. Then I start to get ready and we leave around*
23 *8.30...Today we woke up really late, didn't hear the alarm...I had to help her in the kitchen,*
24 *at least I thought I should help to scrape the coconut or something. But she didn't want me in*
25 *there...” – Haran (Male) during Facebook chat*
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31 It is important to note that our participants were going through a phase of liminality (Turner,
32 1969) and were negotiating ambiguity and uncertainty (Barrios et al., 2012) in their family
33 identity pursuits. They were continuously discovering new aspects relating to their family
34 structure, character, and intergenerational aspects but often failed to articulate such changes
35 during in-depth interviews and planned participant observations. Facebook provided us with a
36 context to create fresh perspectives about changes that were taking place in people's lives,
37 which were hard to articulate. In particular, Facebook engagement became useful in
38 developing multiple perspectives of mundane aspects of everyday lives. Following up
39 sensitive emotions and family issues on Facebook chat was more comfortable for some of the
40 individuals. For example, one participant shared pictures about her routine life after marriage
41 (after becoming a housewife) on Facebook. In response to her friends' comments, she also
42 discussed further details about how “boring” her life as a housewife was and how she
43 attempted to overcome frustration associated with the new role identity. By closely following
44 how she constructed and maintained her Facebook profile through uploading material,
45 sharing personal emotions, and responding to her friends, we were able to capture details of
46 the complexities associated with navigating liminality and negotiating aspects of a new
47 identity in her family status.
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3 There were also participants who frequently updated their Facebook status with emotional
4 messages such as how they felt about their partners, their value systems, and future
5 expectations. Facebook timeline updates (status updates, shared quotes, and picture posting)
6 signalled on-going tension, stress, and ambiguity in new relationships such as how they did
7 not like leaving behind special possessions and how they negotiated the enactment of new
8 family practices. Facebook chat frequently produced powerful expressions of sensitive
9 emotions such as their expectations of marriage life, reasons for leaving behind favourite
10 possessions, tensions in new relationships, and how they were dealing with such situations.
11 Naomi, for example, provided the following intimate insight into her emotional state:
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19 *“Marriage is about understanding. It is about been there for the other person and not making*
20 *them feel alone...When we come home after work all he does is playing video games and I*
21 *have to go to kitchen and make dinner. First it was OK but I am tired of it now...I need a*
22 *change” – Naomi (Female) during Facebook chat*
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26 Facebook timelines also provided access to map changes in participants’ lives throughout the
27 transformation to a new family identity. Some individuals completely re-designed their
28 Facebook timelines after marriage by re-customising their privacy settings, updates, and
29 shared pictures. For example, Shani (female participant) removed some of the old pictures
30 from her night-outs and parties from the times before her marriage and uploaded new pictures
31 about herself and her husband. Mapping gradual and sometimes substantial changes to their
32 personal timelines and following up the meanings behind such changes during subsequent
33 interviews and observations helped us develop layered perspectives across multiple time
34 points on how they re-negotiated new meanings and adapted to the transition.
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42 ***Capturing disjunctures, glosses and overgeneralisations***

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45 Multiple perspectives constructed during Facebook engagement create a rich source of
46 insight during the process of interpretation. Here we discuss how dialogical friendships on
47 Facebook enabled us to identify disjunctures, overgeneralisations, and glosses (Arnould and
48 Wallendorf, 1994) in the process of identity formation.
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53 There are times when participants contradict their Facebook conversations during offline
54 interviews and observations. There are also instances that they narrate everyday experiences
55 quite differently to their Facebook friends (as replies to friends’ comments) than how we as
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3 researchers recollect such moments. For example, during in-depth interviews, Chamal
4 mentioned that he was an open-minded person with a ‘different way of thinking’:
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7 *“I don’t think my wife should be just a housewife and take care of all the household things.*
8 *She is an educated girl. My way of thinking is very different. I am not traditional. I want her*
9 *to be able to go out and move with the society, because I am also like that” – Chamal (Male)*
10 *during an in-depth interview session*
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15 However, his Facebook timeline posts and comments projected a different set of beliefs that
16 are typical of a traditional and conservative Sri Lankan male. Similarly, another male
17 participant claimed that he would “*never*” discuss his personal life with others including his
18 family and friends as it is against the Buddhist teachings. However, he frequently posted and
19 shared personal details relating to his family life on Facebook. His responses to friends’
20 comments also often revealed on-going issues with the members of his extended family.
21 Integrating Facebook added a new perspective to our longitudinal research where we could
22 converse with and observe our participants and identify potential disjunctures,
23 overgeneralisations, and glosses (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) that were evident in such
24 narratives. Therefore, integrating Facebook engagement contributed to deepening the etic
25 perspectives during interpretation building. We used excerpts from Facebook conversations
26 and postings as prompt to stimulate discussion and aid participants’ reflexion during
27 ethnographic fieldwork. In response, participants often attempted to justify their actions
28 revealing a myriad of differing perspectives:
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39 *“I think it is best if she can stay home... There is no doubt about that. That way it is good in*
40 *the future when we have children, household things are in order, and easy on me as well...*
41 *That is what both my grand-mother and mother did. But today it is different... My wife is well*
42 *educated. She had put so much time to it. I can’t just ask her to stay home, can I? Plus, these*
43 *times are not easy... We both have to earn if we have to build a house and live well”- Chamal*
44 *(Male) during Facebook chat and ethnographic conversations*
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50 Using material from Facebook posts in elicitation enabled us to learn more about family
51 tensions and conflicts such as pertaining to household duties and each other’s roles in the new
52 family. For example, following up on a Facebook status updates revealed the disappointment
53 and stress Dinu was going through in her family:
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3 *“I knew he was going back to school. I was fine with it. But when he studies he really studies.*
4 *It is like he is not home... I have to do everything on my own...I am bored and don't want to*
5 *go crazy...It feels like I have put my life on hold” – Dinu (Female) during observation*
6 *session*
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10 Raising these issues during interviews and observations enabled us to obtain more reflexive
11 responses about how participants negotiated such challenges. Discussing issues in the
12 presence of both individuals (when appropriate) allowed us to initiate rich discussions about
13 each other's emotions and helped us to observe how they clarified, responded, and negotiated
14 divergent meanings.
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18 Using Facebook material such as shared pictures, quotes, comments, conversation histories,
19 and status updates in elicitation also generated differing perspectives. Firstly, some of the
20 Facebook material used in elicitation are chosen by the participants and are more immediate
21 representations of their lives. Thus, such material enhanced informants' ability to reflect and
22 provided insightful responses about their behaviours. For example, some of the pictures we
23 used included favourite material objects, their holiday trips, special family occasions, and
24 ordinary household consumption activities such as preparing meals and occupying domestic
25 spaces. Secondly, reflecting on these pictures during in-depth interviews and participant
26 observation sessions provided us with an opportunity to create a rich seam of data by
27 generating animated discussions between our participants (Heisley and Levy, 1991; Kozinets,
28 2002).
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39 **Managing ethical implications**

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41 In this section we discuss key challenges of building friendships with research participants
42 through Facebook engagement. Firstly, we outline the ethical implications we confronted
43 during the data collection process. Secondly, we discuss two ethical frameworks we adopted
44 and how these frameworks helped us negotiate the ethical implications. Specifically, we
45 elaborate on how we managed the ethical implications of perusing “friendship as method” by
46 paying attention to the ethics of friendship suggested by Tillmann-Healy (2003). Finally, we
47 discuss how adopting the guidelines of online ethical conduct suggested by Kozinets (2010)
48 are useful in navigating challenges of integrating Facebook in ethnographic research .
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56 Adopting “friendship as method” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) creates potential boundary crossing
57 situations and could be problematic to the ethics of professional and personal conduct
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3 (Taylor, 2011). Firstly, setting out to develop friendships in order to gain access and
4 immersion could be viewed as a manipulative intrusion into participants' lives (Taylor,
5 2011). In addition, downloading personal material such as Facebook pictures, observing
6 timeline activities, and joining on-going conversations could be considered intrusive and
7 exploitative. Secondly, leaving the ethnographic fieldwork after data saturation is achieved
8 could be particularly tricky. For example, maintaining contact after data collection was
9 expected by some of the participants and was important to them. Such post-data collection
10 interaction is essential to ensure that participants do not feel exploited and also to manage the
11 intensity of these post-data collection relationship. Finally, managing confidence and trust in
12 terms of privacy could be particularly challenging when the research framework is
13 continuously evolving in the online environment (Langer and Beckman, 2005). In addition,
14 since Facebook is considered a semi-public space, adopting Facebook chat and timeline
15 observations could bring new ethical challenges relating to participant confidentiality and
16 privacy (Baker, 2013).
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27 Accordingly, we adopted two frameworks to overcome these ethical challenges. Firstly, as
28 Tillmann-Healy (2003, p. 734) proposed, we adopted "the practices, the pace, the context,
29 and the ethics of friendship" which are normative to traditional friendships. Specifically, the
30 most important requirement of this approach is to research with an ethic of friendship which
31 includes "a stance of hope, caring, justice, and even love" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735).
32 Secondly, we adopted the guidelines for online ethical conduct proposed by Kozinets (2010;
33 2015) and disclosed our presence, affiliations, and intentions; asked for permission; ensured
34 confidentiality of informants; cited and acknowledged contributions of informants, and took
35 caution relating to informants' semi-public material.
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43 By adopting these frameworks, we disclosed ourselves and the nature of our study to all the
44 participants at the beginning and gained their informed consent. We respected individuality
45 and worked to protect confidentiality throughout the study, even between husbands and
46 wives. There were occasions when individuals discussed family conflict and tension during
47 Facebook chats and following up such issues may have produced deeper insight. However,
48 we consulted the individuals before bringing up such issues in the presence of their partners.
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54 Even though participants' online actions can be a reflection of their social selves (Kozinets,
55 2002), we considered their Facebook pages as a private space and respected their privacy and
56 authority, just as we would do in their homes. We explained what kind of information we
57 would be interested in and how we would be recording their behaviour. During the
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3 subsequent data collection, we recorded important status updates, conversation histories and
4 multiple conversation threads. We also collected visual material such as pictures of
5 informants using their favourite material objects which were uploaded by the informants.
6 Even though it was normative as Facebook friends to browse through informants' Facebook
7 profiles, comment on their posting and engage in chat, we sought separate permission when
8 downloading their material. In addition, if these texts or pictures became an important
9 contribution in the presentation of our findings (as quotes or supplementary material) we also
10 made participants aware of our intentions. At all stages they had the right to refuse the use of
11 any or all of the material.
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19 However, we are not promoting the manipulation of Facebook friendships to extract intimate
20 details of people's lives. Instead we argue that genuine friendships between participant and
21 researcher can evolve within Facebook interactions over time. The first author developed a
22 genuine interest in participants' everyday practices, hobbies, and lifestyles and it created a
23 shared context within which to build trust and confidence in the participant-researcher
24 relationship. As a result, some individuals and families became close friends with the first
25 author and his family and continued to interact with them after the research project. During
26 this stage, Facebook engagement provided a useful medium to manage the exit strategies with
27 such close friends and helped preserve their trust and self-respect. For example, chatting and
28 browsing through timelines enabled us to stay in touch with these participant/friends and
29 learn about and share the joys of interesting moments in their lives such as having children
30 and moving to a new house.
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39 **Contributions and conclusions:**

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42 We acknowledge that there are situational and contextual factors that need deliberating prior
43 to adopting Facebook engagement as a research tool in ethnographic fieldwork. There are
44 research contexts that are inaccessible in online spheres (Kozinets, 2010; 2015), whilst there
45 are also topical areas more appropriate to offline methods (Langer and Beckman, 2005).
46 Therefore, our aim is not to universalise Facebook as a rapport building tool in ethnographic
47 research. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to provide empirical evidence to address the
48 epistemological and methodological implications of Facebook engagement in conventional
49 ethnographic research, especially when exploring complex and sensitive topics. However,
50 considering the ontological, epistemological, and methodological similarities between
51 conventional and online ethnographic research, we also suggest that our framework could be
52 of relevance to other interpretive researchers who are seeking to build close rapport with
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3 participants, especially in online communities that provide ‘hyving social experiences’
4 (Kozinets, 2015).
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7 In addition, our research contributes to “friendship as method” approaches (Ellis, 2007;
8 Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillmann-Healy, 2003) by illustrating how friendships
9 with participants could be developed and maintained. Despite growing literature in friendship
10 as method, there is limited understanding of how friendships could be initiated and sustained
11 during ethnographic fieldwork. There is also a need to address ethical issues related to
12 adopting friendships, especially in online contexts. Our framework and subsequent discussion
13 address these issues and support Facebook as a useful tool within the contemporary
14 ethnographic researchers’ toolkit that provides the opportunity to initiate and foster strong
15 rapport with participants. As such we are clarifying how three research methods intersect,
16 conventional ethnography, netnography/online methods, and friendship as a method. As
17 researchers seeking to understand the complexity of consumers operating in many spheres,
18 we must reconsider and revise appropriately the tools available to address complex research
19 questions.
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30 In conclusion, we argue that engaging on multiple Facebook platforms brings new
31 opportunities for ethnographic researchers to build genuine rapport with participants. By
32 adhering to practice, pace, context, and the ethics of friendships, researchers can facilitate trust
33 and encourage dialogical researcher-participant relationships. We propose that the increased
34 rapport helps overcome three challenges inherent to conventional ethnography: 1) negotiating
35 access and achieving immersion, 2) developing multiple perspectives, and, 3) providing
36 details of the experiences that enable the construction of rich and thick interpretations.
37 Finally, our findings contribute to a rich body of consumer and cross disciplinary
38 ethnographic literature (Baker 2013; Piacenti et al. 2014) by demonstrating how
39 incorporating Facebook allows researchers to expand their field of reference, improves
40 participants’ trust and confidence in the researcher, brings both insider and outsider
41 perspectives, dilutes the power hierarchy in conventional participant-researcher relationships,
42 and increases the likelihood of discovering those revelatory moments of consumption
43 experience (Trigger et al., 2012).
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