

## The Usefulness of Social Networking for Young Professionals in Agriculture: A Netnographic Approach

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### ABSTRACT

Netnography is the conduct of ethnography on the internet, within social networks and communities. Ethnography is a qualitative research method for understanding and analyzing cultural phenomena in its most naturally occurring setting. Netnography employs similar concepts. However it differs as a market research technique which makes use of a participative and an observational approach to the study of online communities. Netnography is primarily used to study Social Media. This is any form of online publication or presence that allows end users to engage in multi-directional conversations. By allowing users to create and share their own content, it gives a direct link into the relationships and interactions among the users themselves and their subject matter. The purpose of this study is to use a netnographic approach to social networking amongst young professionals in agriculture (YPs). Specifically the study examines the level of usefulness of social networking in terms of an information source, a networking movement and a support system for young professionals in agriculture. The study directly examines interaction among the online community of YPs that are involved with the #cooltofarm hashtag topic of the social media site Twitter.

In order to evaluate the usefulness of social networking, the methodology of the study involved the application of the Netnography Process. The method provided a system of meanings within the target group. The process consisted of five steps: 1) Planning a Research Focus; 2) Community Identification and Selection; 3) Engagement, Immersion and Data Collection; 4) Analysis and Interpretation; and 5) Presentation of findings and feedback. Engagement and Immersion began with a period of observation of the YPs community followed by an entree into the commune to participate and ethically gather information. This led to data collection of which three types were recorded; a) Archived (data collected without the researchers involvement); b) Elicited (data co-created by researchers and community members) and; c) Field Notes (observational and reflective data). A Coding process was executed to ensure consistency in the data. Preliminary results have indicated that social networking works well for YPs as a networking tool and a source of agri information. Further data collection and analysis is necessary to illustrate key findings and to meet a set of ten evaluation criteria that assess the standard or quality of netnographic research.

**Keywords:** *Young Professionals in Agriculture, Social Networking, Netnography*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Agriculture today faces many challenges. One of the most urgent is the lack of youth interest in the industry. However there are young people around the world that are interested in the field with tertiary level education and a willingness to pursue careers in the industry. A prime example of such youth is the Young Professionals' Platform for Agricultural Research for Development (YPARD). YPARD is an international movement by Young Professionals for Young Professionals in Agricultural Research for Development. YPARD operates as a network; it is not a formalized institution. The organization has four strategic objectives.

- Exchange of information and connecting
- Opportunities for policy debates
- Promote agriculture among young professionals
- Access to resources and capacity building

In 2012 YPARD saw a 44% increase of new members on ypard.net, its website interface since March 2012 with significant increases in membership on social networks. (YPARD Activity Report 2012) Country representatives for the organization also saw a steady increase in 2013. Some of these countries include Sierra Leone, Malawi, Mali, Benin, Nepal, South Africa, Switzerland, Uzbekistan, Moldova, Serbia, Kyrgyzstan, Trinidad & Tobago, France and Iran. The organization employs several captivating strategies to encourage and keep youth involved in agriculture under a multitude of disciplines. Some of these strategies include: Contests, e-discussions, workshops, knowledge transfer via web activity, social networking and through linkages with leading agri-research institutions. (YPARD 2013)

YPARD makes use of social media to achieve its objectives. Based on aforementioned reports this major communication outlet is positively added to the growth of the organization. Networks used include, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Blogger and RenRen (YPARD Activity Report 2012). For the young professionals (YPs) that are members of the organization it is expected that development of their skills, and capabilities are also occurring. In order to measure the impact of these social media tools this study seeks to use a netnographic approach to examine social networking amongst YPs in agriculture. Specifically the study examines the level of usefulness of social networking in terms of an information source, a networking movement and a support system for these agri youth. The study directly examines interaction among the online community of YPs that were involved with the #cooltofarm hashtag topic of the social media site Twitter.



**Panel 1** – The Young Professional's Platform for Agricultural Research and Development



**Panel 2** – Social Media Networking Site - Twitter

### 1.2 Social Media: Twitter

Social Media refers to any form of online publication or presence that allows end users to engage in multi-directional conversations. By allowing users to create and share their own content, it gives a direct link into the relationships and interactions among the users themselves and their subject matter. For the purposes of this study, examination of activity on the social media site Twitter is focused upon.

Twitter is a micro blogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters, known as "tweets". It has over 500 million registered users as of 2012, generating over 340 million tweets daily and handling over 1.6 billion search

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queries per day. (Twitter.com Blog 2013) One of the features of the service is the use of hashtags; this is a word or phrase prefixed with the symbol '#'. Hashtags provide a means of grouping messages on twitter and other social media sites. A user can search for the hashtag and procure the set of messages that contain it.

Started as an experiment by YP, Olawale Isiah Ojo for his business Agropreneur Naija; #cooltofarm targets youth with the aim of changing their mindset and orientation about agriculture. The aim of the business is to sensitize and encourage young ones in Nigeria to seize the opportunities in agriculture open to them now by viewing it as a business. The #cooltofarm tweet chats were organized each Monday and Friday at 15:30 UTC+1 from Jan 2013 to March 2013 on youth in agriculture issues. Each tweet chat seeks to engage members of the YP community, agricultural institutions, youth in agriculture and any other interested parties. Together with fellow YP Codrin Paveliuc-Olariu of Romania the #cooltofarm hashtag was repurposed in the aforementioned manner. They served as moderators for the tweet chat events during the time period.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Netnography

This is a type of online, internet ethnography; a qualitative research method for understanding and analyzing cultural phenomena in its most naturally occurring setting “The method provides guidelines for the adaption of participant observation procedures to the contingencies of online community and culture that manifest through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets 2010). Focusing on context the process provides cultural insight into the people within a community that engages primarily online.

### 3. Methodology and Results

The Netnography process is a blended approach of Ethnography and Netnography as it includes both online and in-person data collection. It consists of five steps:

1) Planning a Research Focus – This involved the identification of a research topic and subsequent questions. At this stage observation and participation methods were decided upon. As previously mentioned the study focuses on agri youth and their level of empowerment when making use of the social media tool twitter. Specifically attention is given to the use of twitter as an information source, as a networking tool and foundation for moral support in the pursuit of professional careers in agriculture. A two week observation period was employed from February 1<sup>st</sup> -14<sup>th</sup>. Participation began at the end of this period starting February 15<sup>th</sup> and ending March 1<sup>st</sup>.

2) Community Identification and Selection – The YPARD organization and network was selected as the most suitable online community for the study. YPARD holds significant outlets in social media which are used in the promotion of its activities, the sharing of web knowledge, job & further education opportunities along with professional support.

During this stage the researcher prepared for entry on ‘entree’ into the online community. In doing so the Netnography process allows the researcher to participate within the community, thus attention must be paid to the ethical aspects of conducting such research. The researcher’s intentions are made clear so that participants are aware of the study and are willing to cooperate. However this may deter persons from engaging as usual and with the researcher. Therefore in order to ensure that the study can be ethically and effectively completed the researcher, made direct contact with the moderator, Mr. Codrin Paveliuc-Olariu, indicating the intentions and research focus of the study. As such the moderator facilitated an appropriate entree into the discourse of the community via an invite to the research on twitter. This method though not common in Netnographic research can be attributed to the operational procedures of the community itself where many agri institutions, business,

young professionals and agri youth are invited to share their opinions, experiences and to engage in the discussion of particular topics within the community.



**Panel 3 – (To the left) Depiction of the researcher’s ‘Entree’ into the online community.**

The researcher is credited with the title @wiscobasco and given informed consent to participant in the community both on a continual basis and for research purposes.

Following this engagement and interaction within the community was executed. All participants were notified of this development as unlike the ‘Entree,’ this event was broadcast across the community using the #cooltofarm hashtag.

3) Engagement, Immersion and Data Collection – This step was executed via engagement in the activities of the community. Topics discussed during the data collection period of Feb 15 – March 1 2013 include; Skill sets which youth need to succeed, Youth perspectives in agriculture, and the problem of Youth unemployment and agriculture as a solution.

Data collected for the Netnography process can yield three types: a) Archived (data collected without the researchers involvement); b) Elicited (data co-created by researchers and community members) and; c) Field Notes (observational and reflective data).

For the purposes of this study emphasis was placed on archived data and field notes. Although elicited data was collected through simple interaction of the tweet chats of the community, the other two types provided much more data for analysis. Due to the nature of twitter’s operation information and opinion sharing occurs every few minutes. The frequency of tweets is increased according to the number of participants. As primary data can be collected at this time, the researcher choose to focus on gathering field notes and examining archived data rather than attempt to elicit data.



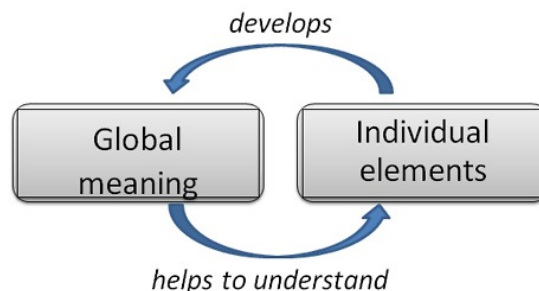
**Panel 4 – Depiction of the researcher’s Immersion into the community.**

Engagement and Immersion began with a period of observation of the YPs

#### 4) Analysis and Interpretation –

Data Analysis can be executed using two main methods; Analytical Coding and Hermeneutic Analysis. The researcher has chosen to utilize the latter method due to the nature of the twitter platform as short message service (SMS).

Hermeneutic Analysis can be defined as the theory and methodology of interpretation, especially of text. The analysis can be applied to other types of media. According to Patterson et al 2004 the aim of the analysis is to create an organizing system. “The purpose of an organizing system is to identify predominant themes through which the item of analysis which can be meaningfully organized, interpreted, and presented. The process of developing an organizing system is the ‘analysis,’ while the final organizing system is the product of the analysis” (Patterson et al 2004).



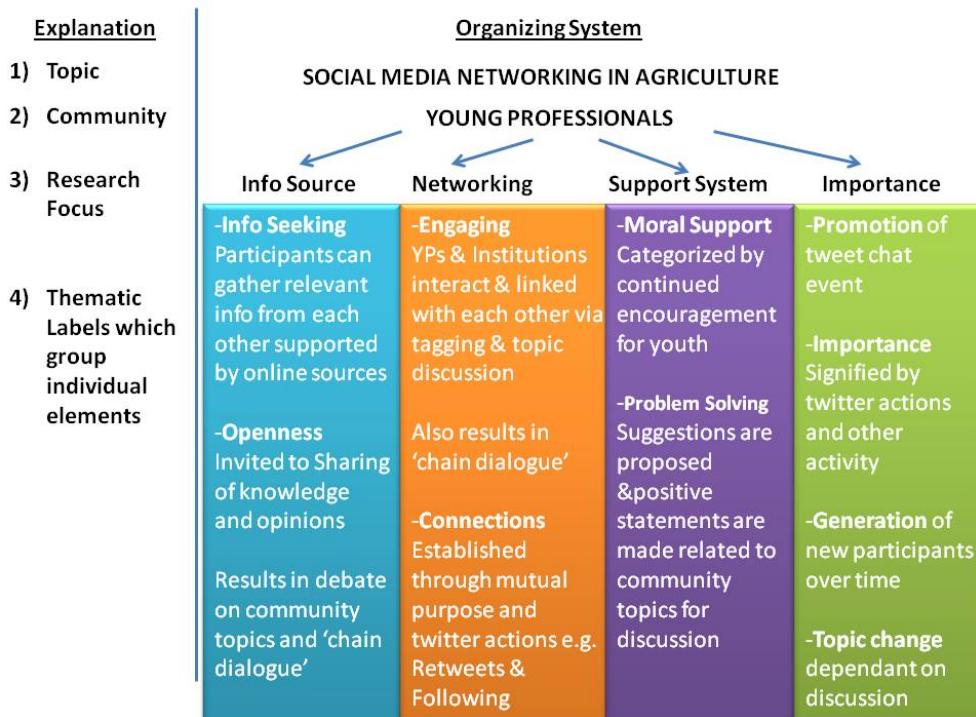
**Panel 4** – The Hermeneutic Circle (Yung Yu 2011)

As illustrated in Panel 4 above, the system is made up of individual elements or meaning units and thematic labels which provide global meaning. “It is an iterative cycle. The research must scan and re-scan for new individual elements and hone and re-hone the overall global insight until there are no more contradictions as the new data is collected and as existing data is revisited (Yung Yu 2011). The benefit of a successful system is that it illustrates a holistic vision of themes and individual elements which the qualitative data provides including the inter relatedness that occurs among them. **The following steps were initiated to ensure hermeneutic analysis:**

- I) Creation of a physical copy of community interaction – Although all three types of data(archived, elicited, field notes) were collected during the tweet chat activity, proper analysis demands a revisit to existing data. As such for the time period of data collection and interactions a hard copy was procured.
- II) Identification of a reference system – In order to keep track of specific text or activity an index system is needed for effective management. In this case, the twitter service provides the date and time for each tweet allowing highly effective referencing to be possible. The extract was read in its entirety according to this system to provide a complete understanding of the content.
- III) Scanning for individual elements – The interaction extract is then scanned for individual elements or meaning units. These are portions of text that can be focused on separately but require other units and the entire extract in order to be fully understood. Due to the nature of twitter, individual elements or meaning units are words, phrases or even entire sentences within the dialogue which are all limited by the 140 character spaces on the platform.
- IV) Interpreting thematic levels for global insight – Once individual elements are recognised and become repetitive the researcher grouped the elements into categories under thematic labels. The individual elements represent the hard data of the study, that is the actual statements within community discourse while the thematic labels represent the researcher’s analysis; that is what is interpreted and meant by the statements as it relates to the research focus.
- V) Identifying the connections between elements and labels – The researcher then illustrates the interconnectedness between individual elements and thematic labels. This means that a group of

elements can be categorized under multiple labels and that the labels themselves can be linked to each other. Although both the meaning units and thematic labels are guided by the research focus both can have new emergent items that occur during analysis of the data.

- VI) Organisation of interpretation – At this stage the organizing system is complete and must be clearly explained. Use of a visual aid is appropriate. The follow tree diagram illustrated all meaning units and thematic labels, the process and product of the analysis.



Panel 5 – Illustration of Final Organising System for the Tweet Chat of Young Professionals in Agriculture

- VII) Discussion of interpretation – The findings of the analysis are presented using a summary of interpretations. The following summarizes each label and element, and any inter related aspect;

**Twitter as an Information Source for YPs:** The tweet chat sessions effectively provide seekers with agri-information of meaning to youth and other interested parties via knowledge sharing and discussion. Participants are also invited to share their opinions on topics within the community. This can result in back and forth dialogue between 1- 3 participants; referred to as **chain dialogue**. Also observed is the instance of debate which can be heated at times dependant on the difference of opinion on the topic at hand. Subsequently topic changes may occur which is a natural part of the **Importance** associated with the tweet chat event.

**Importance of the tweet chat event:** This thematic label is a new emergent from the analysis of the data, having not been part of the initial research focus. The relevance of the discussion is increased via the constant use of the hashtag itself **#cooltofarm**. For every instance of communication the hashtag is used to **promote** the event and keep track of tweets. The hashtag is also coupled with interest generating statements or questions to further increase the importance of the event. The same occurs on the day of major tweet chats just before, during and after the session, taking the form of **twitter action** such as Retweeting, social reporting of the event and generalized hashtags e.g. #youth #agriculture #ag4dev and #ard. Such action leads to the professional connections with current participants on a wider scale as new YPs, agri institutions and other interested parties

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into the community. This activity is directly related to the **Networking** benefit that occurs as a result of interaction in the community.

**Professional Networking:** This area is categorized by engagement amongst all participants of the community through **twitter actions** and **chain dialogue**, an element that can be found under the thematic label of information. The label, **networking** is also linked to the label of **support** which is guided by mutual purpose of the community members. These aspects are all governed by the general procedures of entry and exit into the discussion via respectful interaction, sharing of opinions and other twitter actions.

**Provision of a Support System:** The **#cooltofarm** tweet chat provided to be a highly significant source of moral support. The hashtag itself can be associated with positive thinking on agriculture as a career choice while simultaneously promoting the event. Frequently positive **statements** are made mainly geared towards youth and their continue efforts in the sector. They are supported with links to **information sources** and at times seek to answer interest generating **questions** related to the topic of discussion.

5) Presentation of findings and feedback – The last step of hermeneutic analysis refers to a member check. This involves the presentation of some or all findings to members of the community as they are all participants. It allows the researcher gain further insight into observed phenomena, look over errors and clear misinterpretations all with the help of the participants. This step also assists with ethical concerns of biased data collection that must be avoided in the study. In order to evaluate the Netnography process carried out within the study, the following evaluation criteria were the focal point in gathering feedback from the participants of the study; **Coherence, Rigor, Literacy, Groundedness, Innovation, Resonance, Verisimilitude, Reflexibility, Praxis, Intermix**. The evaluation criterion was shared with the moderator of the tweet chat. The following indicates the feedback provided:

Criteria	Rating (On a Scale of 1-10)
<b>Coherence</b> - Interpretations of the study are free of internal contradictions	7
<b>Rigor</b> - Follows principled protocol in conducting research	9
<b>Literacy</b> - recognizes and acknowledges existing and relevant research	8
<b>Groundedness</b> - Theoretical representation are logically sound and supported by data	7
<b>Innovation</b> - Extends existing body of knowledge and offers a new way of understanding	6
<b>Resonance</b> - Establishes personalized and sensitizing connection between the reader and the culture or community	6
<b>Verisimilitude</b> - Establishes a lifelike cultural experience for the readers	8
<b>Reflexibility</b> - Recognizes subjectiveness of findings and is open to alternate interpretation	9
<b>Praxis</b> - Motivates and inspires social betterment	7
<b>Intermix</b> - Recognizes the interconnections between different social interaction modes in the culture/community	8

As indicated by the solicited feedback netnography process was executed effectively for the purposes of the study. Additional feedback is needed from other participants to make this information valid.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study has proven there is a high level of usefulness of social networking in terms of an information source, a networking movement and particularly support system for young professionals in agriculture. There was a high instance of positive statements geared towards moral support for participants in

the community. This was closely followed by the mutual aim of professional networking and establishing connections by all participants. An emergent factor was revealed in the Promotion of the #cooltofarm tweet chat as an important event. High instance of promotion, results in increased participants and in the benefits achieved by the other thematic labels for the overall community. And lastly as an information source the social interaction performed well specifically for information seekers who presented enquires when invited to share their opinions.

It should be noted that the study does not provide empirical data which is necessary to provide a well balanced study involving both qualitative and quantitative data. Due to time constraints very little feedback was provided in or to evaluate the executed netnography process. However preliminary results in that aspect indicate that the process was effectively executed. Overall the twitter platform is a significant benefit to the YP community directly assisting in achieving their goals and facilitating its operations.

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