35. Flexible fieldnoting for contemporary consumer culture research

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the practice of *flexible fieldnoting*, and shows how it can be performed along the six axes of flexibility. This practice has evolved in response to fieldwork that is increasingly collaborative and multisited. Traditionally, fieldnotes focus on capturing, through written records, the researchers' observations and experiences in the field. Consumer culture researchers have long used fieldnotes in ethnography (Peñaloza and Cayla, 2006), grounded theory (Goulding, 2002; Locke, 2000) and netnography (Kozinets, 2019) projects. As such, researchers are familiar with the standard procedures and guidelines, borrowed from anthropology, for writing fieldnotes and incorporating them into the analytical process. Fieldnotes take multiple formats and serve various purposes: condensed accounts or jottings (quick notes taken during fieldwork), expanded accounts (detailed notes made soon after each immersion in the field), fieldwork journal (a record of the researcher's experiences, ideas and thoughts) and analysis and interpretation notes (generalizations, insights into the culture studied, analytical possibilities) (Emerson et al., 1995; Spradley, 1980). Hence, fieldnotes are not only a type of data, but also 'a process of analysis-in-description' (Emerson et al., 1995, 106). Flexible fieldnoting contributes to this understanding by supporting researchers in becoming more responsive to the dynamic needs of the field.

Recommendations for how to write and incorporate fieldnotes into interpretive studies have evolved to incorporate changes in cultural phenomena and research practices (Lofland et al., 2022). Consumer culture has evolved over the past decades, along with technologies. As a result, consumption cultures that used to be obscure are now openly accessible to researchers across multiple online platforms. Moreover, the globalization of academic fields (Belkhir et al., 2019) has encouraged the formation of international research teams, who develop research projects from a distance or across multiple fields. Guidelines for generating and analyzing fieldnotes have evolved accordingly. For example, applied ethnographer Maria Cury (2015, 3) argues for 'moving fieldnotes from a private practice of writing alone in the field and towards a social practice that engages teams and stakeholders'. Similarly, Atkinson (2014) invites researchers to cultivate engagement with multiple technologies to produce fieldnotes, in addition to those generic skills that are clearly needed (e.g. ethnographic sensibility).

This chapter represents our effort to capture, reflect upon, and share learning from our experience of writing fieldnotes across multiple research projects in the field of consumer culture (see Table 35.1). We argue that one invaluable skill for consumer culture researchers is

flexibility in producing fieldnotes. We propose that researchers consider the level of flexibility needed for their projects based on six aspects: (1) Location, (2) Format, (3) Team, (4) Timing, (5) Interaction and (6) Archive. By doing so, researchers will be better prepared to navigate changing data collection demands in dynamic fields.

Table 35.1   Projects using flexible fieldnoting

Project Label	Field	References
Academic Isolation	Early career researchers' experience of isolation in globalized academic fields.	Belkhir, Meriam, Myriam Brouard, Katja H. Brunk, Marlon Dalmoro, Marcia Christina Ferreira, Bernardo Figueiredo, Aimee Dinnin Huff, Daiane Scaraboto, Olivier Sibai and Andrew N. Smith (2019), 'Isolation in Globalizing Academic Fields: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Early Career Researchers', *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 18(2), 261–85.
Couchsurfing	Online and offline interactions among users of the shared accommodation network couchsurfing.org.	Scaraboto, Daiane and Bernardo Figueiredo (2022), 'How Orchestration Work Creates Value in the Sharing Economy', *Journal of Marketing*, 86(2), 25–44.
Circulating Holy Mary Statues	Offline circulation of Holy Mary statues among neighbors in two Brazilian cities, and online content about the practice.	Scaraboto, Daiane and Bernardo Figueiredo (2017), 'Holy Mary Goes 'Round: Using Object Circulation to Promote Hybrid Value Regimes in Alternative Economies', *Journal of Macromarketing*, 37(2), 180–92.
Makeshifting	Social practice of makeshifting (creative solutions reusing objects, parts, and materials) in Brazil, and its online sharing.	Ferreira, Marcia Christina, Daiane Scaraboto, Adriana Schneider Dallolio, Bernardo Figueiredo and Eliane Zamith Brito (2020), 'Disruptive Consumption: How Consumers Challenge Mainstream Markets Through Makeshifting', in Jennifer Argo, Tina M. Lowrey and Hope Jensen Schau (eds), *NA – Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 48, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, 331–2.
Melissa Collectors	Online content and online-offline communities of Melissa shoes collectors.	Ferreira, Marcia Christina and Daiane Scaraboto (2016), 'My Plastic Dreams: Towards an Extended Understanding of Materiality and the Shaping of Consumer Identities', *Journal of Business Research*, 69(1), 191–207. Scaraboto, Daiane, Marcia Christina Ferreira and Emily Chung (2016), 'Materials Matter: An Exploration of the Curatorial Practices of Consumers as Collectors', in Nil Özçağlar-Toulouse, Diego Rinallo and Russell W. Belk (eds), *Consumer Culture Theory (Research in Consumer Behavior)*, Volume 18, Bingley, WA: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 217–43.
Travel Bugs	Online and offline interactions about circulating trackable items among participants in the hobby of Geocaching.	Figueiredo, Bernardo and Daiane Scaraboto (2016), 'The Systemic Creation of Value through Circulation in Collaborative Consumer Networks', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 43(4), 509–33. Scaraboto, Daiane and Bernardo Figueiredo (2015), 'How to Create Value via Object Circulation in Gift Systems', in *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings*, 2015(1), 235–53.

We structure our approach to producing fieldnotes across six axes of flexibility (see Figure 35.1). Each axis has two anchors representing contrasting qualities of the same aspect, with each aspect varying according to fieldwork needs. Collectively, these axes address the what, when, where, how and why of producing fieldnotes.
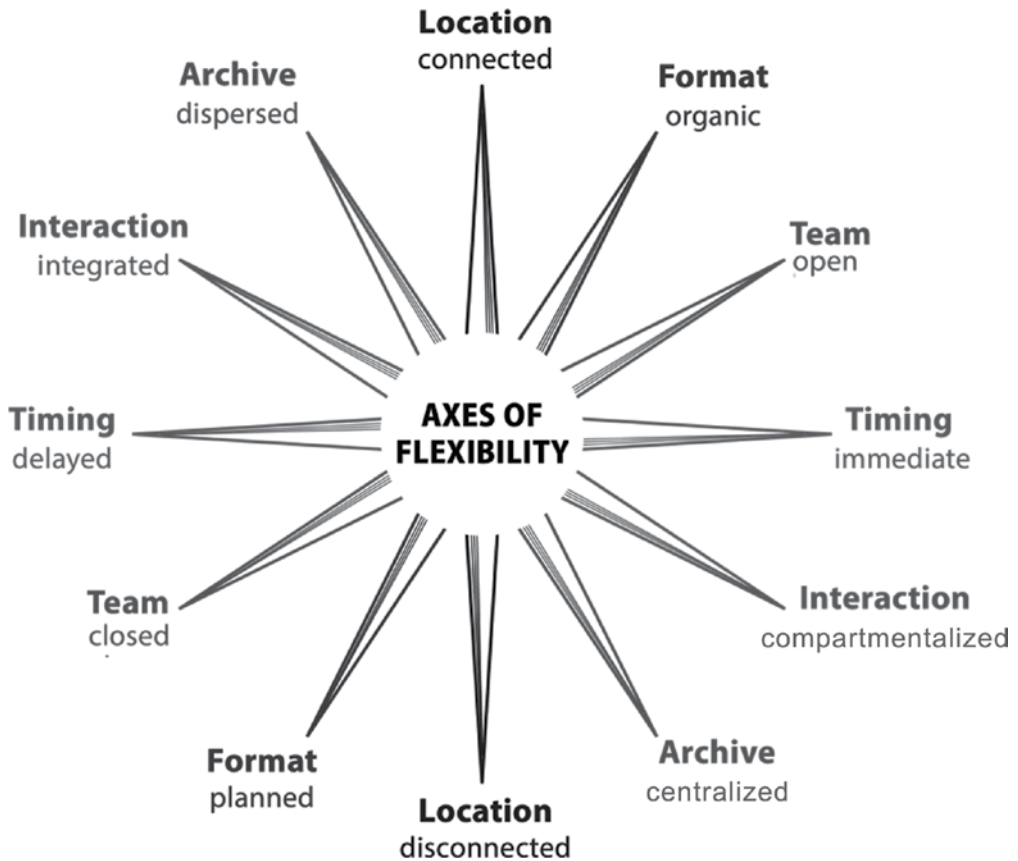

Location connected
Archive dispersed
Format organic
Interaction integrated
Team open
Timing delayed
AXES OF FLEXIBILITY
Timing immediate
Team closed
Interaction compartmentalized
Format planned
Location disconnected
Archive centralized

Figure 35.1   Fieldnoting axes of flexibility

We conceptualize *flexible fieldnoting* as the practice of conducting fieldwork in contemporary consumer cultures in ways that can dynamically capture cultural aspects of the field as well as the researchers' reflexivity regarding these aspects. As a practice, flexible fieldnoting is performed differently in each project, according to the changing demands of data collection in dynamic fields. By reflecting upon these axes of flexibility at the onset of a project, ethnographers can set the intention to produce field notes in flexible ways. This approach produces rich fieldnotes that keep track of complex fields and their evolution, across the duration of research projects. It allows researchers to generate collective and immersive fieldnotes, even when working across multiple sites and time zones. The flexibility axes can also help Grounded

Theory researchers whose earlier fieldnotes will later become essential to the constant comparison process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

AXES OF FLEXIBILITY

Aligned with traditional approaches to writing fieldnotes, we see fieldnotes as a combination of selective description and research. As Emerson and colleagues note, fieldnotes writing 'is both intuitive, reflecting the ethnographer's changing sense of what might possibly be made interesting or important to future readers, and empathetic, reflecting the ethnographer's sense of what is interesting or important to the people he is observing' (Emerson et al., 1995, 11). As we introduce the axes of flexibility, we also leave room for fieldnoting to be flexible in that regard: in some cases, fieldnotes will be descriptive (e.g. offering details of spaces, recounting events), while in others they will be reflexive (e.g. focused on the researcher's experience of watching a video). We describe each of the axes of flexibility below.

Location: Connected Versus Disconnected

Contemporary consumer culture research often includes both online and offline aspects. Offline, researchers can stay at their fieldwork location to write fieldnotes or retreat to a separate location (e.g. a hotel, their offices; Clifford, 1990). This approach of keeping fieldnotes close to the data also keeps the data close to the researchers. For example, when only one researcher is on site, other members of the team can keep connected to the field through engaging with reflections and observations produced by the researcher who is conducting fieldwork.

Flexibility of location is particularly relevant for the online components of research projects. Online fieldnotes can often be captured through the same platforms where the phenomenon is unfolding, with researchers choosing to be connected to the location where the phenomenon occurs. For example, in projects where multiple social media platforms are involved, multiple researchers can connect their accounts (e.g. 'following' or 'friending' each other) to register their observations and reflections through private messages on each platform, thereby writing fieldnotes at the same location as the data is collected.

Keeping fieldwork and fieldnoting connected in the same place helps keep the data in its original format, with the researchers' notes attached to it. For evolving data, such as ongoing comment threads on online platforms, live links shared by private messages on a platform allow researchers to immediately revisit the data to check the data for changes, before responding to fieldnote prompts made by a collaborator.

For example, in a study of Melissa shoe collectors, Christina saw a Facebook post featuring a collector with whom the researchers were not familiar. In the post, an image showed the collector posing in front of shelves containing hundreds of pairs of plastic shoes. Immediately upon seeing it, Christina shared the post with Daiane through Facebook Messenger. When Daiane clicked on the link a few hours later, the post already had 500 comments, and she made a note of that surprising engagement when replying to Christina's Facebook message. Daiane's observation prompted Christina to add this collector to the sample of those they were following online and keep an eye on whether the consumer would migrate from collector to influencer. This flexible fieldnoting allowed the researchers to extend their sampling and keep track of a new influencer as soon as she emerged.

Similarly, when Melissa collectors started doing 'lives' on Instagram, Christina and Daiane exchanged fieldnotes about the 'lives' on the same platform, leveraging its affordances. An exception to this was YouTube, which did not offer a viewer-to-viewer messaging solution. When making notes about videos posted by collectors on YouTube, Christina and Daiane often resorted to other platforms (e.g. WhatsApp) or email, sharing links to the YouTube videos that they were discussing. This flexibility of producing fieldnotes across multiple locations facilitates immediate reflexivity and increases researcher engagement with the same tools that shape the experiences of those consumers being studied. Although this method simplifies fieldnote capture, it requires additional effort to retrieve, organize and systematize these fieldnotes; however, there are ways to manage this (see section on archiving).

An additional advantage of fieldnoting across locations is that researchers can compare their observations of content in each location. In online research, for example, what one sees on a given platform depends on algorithms (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022; Scaraboto and Ferreira, 2022) and one's browsing history and patterns. As such, having more than one researcher capturing data and sharing their observations in the same location allows for richer fieldnotes that capture cultural aspects of the field from multiple perspectives. However, co-location of data and fieldnotes is not always possible or desirable: there are projects that demand centralization of data for security reasons, or when the researchers collecting the data differ from the ones analyzing it. In such cases, fieldnoting might require flexibility from the researchers to write their notes in a secure and centralized platform, not co-located with the field.

Format: Organic Versus Planned

The popularity of smartphones and other technologies has transformed fieldwork practices (Sanjek and Tratner, 2016), allowing researchers to easily create and share notes with their research teams in a variety of formats. Moreover, some research projects will, by nature, encourage researchers to work with an ensemble of fieldnotes formats.

Our research on makeshifting observes how consumers design and create their own goods by (re)using materials, parts or objects at hand. These consumers share step-by-step textual, visual and audio-visual explanations of their makeshifts through an array of social media platforms. To better capture the richness of this dataset, our fieldnotes also employ a variety of formats. A makeshift video hyperlink is complemented by a textual note sent to the team. Similarly, a voice message is coupled with a photo taken of a makeshift spotted in real life. Combined, these extended accounts enrich the researchers' immersion in the field.

Format variety also enables deep and encompassing notes about participant observation. Inspired by observations in the field regarding making and recording makeshift playful toys, Daiane recorded videos, took photos and wrote about her experience of creating her own makeshift butterfly nets with her daughter. The spontaneous creation, which was driven by the need to find ways to play in a different context, prompted Daiane's reflection on the improvised aspects of makeshifting (see Figure 35.2; left). Christina opted for a purposive participant observation. Christina was fascinated by a video featured on her Facebook feed that demonstrated how to create a barbecue blower using plastic bottles. She decided to replicate the makeshift, but it took her three attempts to get it right. Her trials and tribulations were shared during an online meeting for collective reflections on the practical aspects of makeshifting.

Multiformat ensembles can emerge organically following the researchers' reflexive process when a note or prompt sent in one format generates responses in other formats. For example,

a textual note could elicit responses from collaborators in voice messages, images and even videos. Christina's note, saved as a draft in her mailbox, prompted Daiane to sketch a possible framework, which she shared via an online document. Following that exchange, Christina left a voice message for the group documenting their discussion. This prompted Bernardo to start a reflexive discussion about the emerging ideas. The voice messages and text interactions proved so fruitful that they were all compiled and shared via email, thereby formalizing the collective fieldnoting process (see Figure 35.2, right). However, the organic approach offers less control over chosen formats requiring tools that support this flexibility.

Figure 35.2   *Organic fieldnoting: participant observation (left) and format ensemble (right)*

Navigating formats can also be planned. During fieldwork for the project on Circulating Holy Mary Statues in Brazil, Daiane planned a trip to conduct fieldwork within Catholic groups in Brazil. She agreed to send WhatsApp messages with comments, photos and audios to Bernardo whenever something interesting happened. The arrangement provided Daiane with maximum flexibility while allowing Bernardo to participate in the fieldnoting process remotely.

Control over data generation processes directly influences the choice between the planned and organic fieldnote formats. When researchers wish to standardize data generation processes, opting for planned fieldnote formats guarantees consistency and avoids oversights. Conversely, projects that favor participants' ability to generate data in multiple formats often adopt the organic approach because this allows for capturing spontaneity during fieldwork. Although an organic approach to fieldnote formats will later require consolidation, it is worthwhile because it can entice serendipitous moments that will improve fieldwork and expand research possibilities.

Team: Closed Versus Open

When working in teams, researchers might need to produce fieldnotes that are more closed or more open. Closed fieldnotes are shared only with the researchers involved in the group. In our research group, 'The Scrutinizers', we engaged in a collaborative autoethnography to understand academic isolation among early career researchers. We generated data about group members' experienced isolation, actions, behaviors and feelings through multiple rounds of introspections. Our written self-reflective data were continuously enriched and expanded through individual and group observations and notes made on the introspection files, as well as during group discussions via a digital communication platform, an online document editor and email threads where we discussed our individual experiences of academic isolation and attempts at mitigation.

This project offers a good illustration of how fieldnotes can be enriched when multiple researchers collaborate in fieldnoting by reading one another's fieldnotes and adding to them. For example, consider an introspective note shared by one group member:

> But there were many others on the same boat, so I did not feel socially isolated at all. Quite the opposite. I formed some bonds with people, and I carried them for life [...]. So, somehow the social bonds were created by a sense of being on the learning/entrant boat at the same time.

In reading that note, another group member made a note of their own (as a comment in the online document editor containing all introspections):

> This is interesting for me because the social bonds need to be exercised and maintained, and I want to know what else is behind the maintenance of bonds.

Prompted by such exchanges, the group discussed directions for analyzing the data produced. Given the collaborative autoethnographic character of this project, it made sense to keep fieldnotes private to the team.

In contrast, in online research, participant observation can be done and captured publicly through open fieldnotes shared on the researchers' social media pages. This means that fieldnotes are produced beyond the boundaries of the research team, as the researchers welcome field observations and reflections shared by non-researchers. This makes fieldwork observation and interpretation more porous, allowing researchers' interpretations to be endorsed or disputed by the communities. For example, in their experiment of object circulation for the Travel Bugs project, Bernardo and Daiane openly shared multiple posts on Facebook about their experiences with travelling objects circulated among academic friends. Facebook friends of the researchers who were also involved in circulating the objects commented on these posts, prompted further reflection about those experiences, and participated in the culture along with the researchers, suggesting additional layers of cultural understanding to the phenomenon (see Figure 35.3). Open fieldnotes make sense when the interpretation and sensemaking process requires help from the wider community.

Timing: Immediate Versus Delayed

Flexible fieldnotes attend to the timing of note taking, inviting researchers to leverage their direct interaction with online and offline aspects of the field. Immediate fieldnotes help
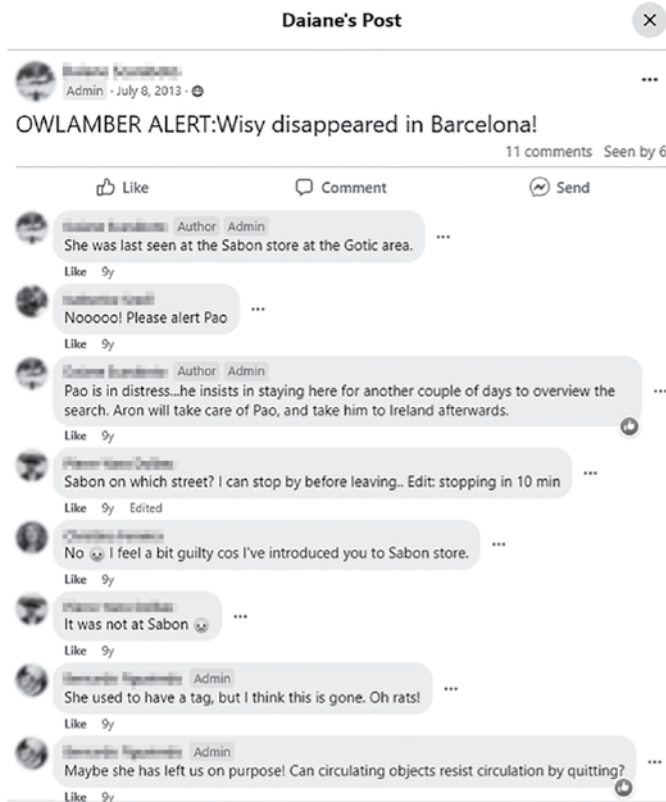
Figure 35.3   Example of open team fieldnoting

capture and share first impressions, raw moments of emotion and uncertainty, confusion and indeterminacy, as they emerge in the field. Delayed fieldnoting might be a contingency (e.g. a researcher participating in scuba diving practices cannot register her experience straight away), a desirable aspect (e.g. to create more time for reflection) or a complementarity strategy (e.g. to contrast immediate versus delayed emotions).

For example, during the Couchsurfing project, Bernardo arranged for a couchsurfer to host him in Belgium. This couchsurfer's profile was quite unusual, stating that people should remain naked while staying in his apartment. The host was forthright about this, and there were other eccentricities on his profile and webpage, which made Bernardo feel that the situation was risky. However, the host had previously received more than 500 other couchsurfers and had very positive evaluations, which made him an important informant. Bernardo decided to stay at the host's apartment, but during the entire experience, he kept an open WhatsApp chat with Daiane, so he could share text and voice messages, and she could check in about his safety. The posts capture both descriptive aspects of the place and Bernardo's anxiety and excitement about meeting this host, including his wondering of whether previous guests might have felt the same, and his surprise and amazement when finding other guests in the naturist's house. Messages also described some aspects of the experience that put Bernardo at ease, such as the host cooking dinner for his guests and offering Belgian beer, and others that made him

uncomfortable, such as doorless rooms and a set of rules about when and how to go nude in the house. These notes allowed Daiane to ask about specific aspects of the field ('Is there a bathroom door?'), which prompted Bernardo to probe the field further. From a distance, Daiane was also able to help by sharing practical ways of dealing with fieldwork uncertainties, risks, and dangers (e.g. Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Sluka, 2012).

The ability to incorporate immediate feelings, sensations and thoughts as they unfolded was important. Bernardo's experience kept changing and what seemed strange in one moment was perceived as safe in the next. Then something else would happen that would make him feel uncomfortable or out-of-place again. This constant need to recalibrate the experience to manage the unexpected was captured as experience co-creation and the need for consumer orchestration, two central concepts in the paper that emerged from this fieldwork.

While more immediate fieldnotes capture the emotional rollercoaster journey and the indeterminacy of fieldwork, the delayed ones capture a more distanced take on the field, when researchers can comment on what they experienced with an eye on the bigger context in which the observation might fit. Bernardo's more immediate fieldnotes complemented the delayed reflections, made at the end of the day and at the end of the trip. Thus, Bernardo's delayed fieldnotes registered how the tensions from the morning had reduced and describe how this experience compared to his other couchsurfing stays. Whether flexible fieldnotes are immediate or delayed, being attentive to the temporal aspects of note taking helps researchers adapt to the context and demands of fieldwork.

Interaction: Compartmentalized Versus Integrated

Flexible fieldnoting is a practice that builds on researchers' interactivity. Whether this interactivity is more compartmentalized (e.g. in scheduled periodic meetings) or more integrated (e.g. spontaneously, across multiple platforms), flexible fieldnoting supports an iterative process of moving seamlessly from observation to interpretation to reflection to theorization.

During the Travel Bugs project, for example, Daiane and Bernardo followed, online and offline, objects that the players of the game Geocaching moved around. The distributed nature of the fieldwork required the researchers to be in constant contact with each other, to share their experiences of encountering these objects. They shared, for example, screenshots of the online profiles of Travel Bugs that they thought were interesting to follow and shared notes about what they thought was interesting about a particular profile. The researchers were considering using theories of gift-systems and the Kula ring, so they decided to circulate plush toys as a way of sensitizing themselves to the role of circulating objects in social networks.

Much like Travel Bugs, the circulating objects launched by Daiane and Bernardo had instructions tags and online profiles (on Facebook). As the objects were carried from place to place by academic friends, one of the tags got wet. Sharing this information sensitized the researchers to the precarity of some of these objects and made them note that geocachers often had issues with Travel Bugs getting damaged during circulation. When this incident happened, the researchers exchanged notes, discussing what to do. Eventually, Daiane laminated the toy's tag, photographed it and shared it with Bernardo. The picture generated further comments, as Bernardo questioned whether this was an instance of 'protecting' or 'preparing' the circulating object (see Figure 35.4). These were two preliminary conceptual categories that the researchers had identified as they tried to classify other similar practices in the field. But until then, the categories had never seemed to overlap. In this case, the researchers' flexible field-

notes about participant observation in object circulation allowed them to collectively reflect about the nature of these two practices and further separate one from the other.

The example above highlights how the interactive nature of flexible fieldnotes helps researchers become more attentive to the field, work in a distributed manner, share ongoing impressions and better theorize the field in the process. This process can be integrated, as in the example above, where one researcher's fieldnotes prompt others to observe, focus and reflect more. However, for interdependent sub-projects within a larger project, projects with external research assistants or projects carried out in multiple sites by separate teams, the interaction needs to be compartmentalized. In this case, fieldnotes do not become integrated straight away but might build upon each other sequentially, or through side conversations between researchers across teams. To preserve interactivity, it might be useful to designate representatives to exchange notes across teams and see how synergies across fieldnotes can be leveraged.

Figure 35.4   Example of integrated interaction fieldnoting

Archive: Dispersed Versus Centralized

Methodological decisions about what locations to observe and note formats to use will guide the process of developing the fieldnotes archive. Archiving can be a dispersed process when multiple locations are being observed, such as in the first phase of Christina and Daiane's research on Melissa shoes collectors. The need to keep the data in its original format led

to their decision to annotate directly where the online interactions were happening. When platform limitations required so (i.e. YouTube), annotations moved to an instant messaging application where a technological resource (i.e. hyperlinks) was employed to facilitate data retrieval. As such, the fieldnotes archive was spread across several locations.

It is also possible to centralize fieldnotes archives. Informants from our research on make-shifting generated data in a variety of formats and shared it in person – during interviews, workshops and home tours – and online through blogs, forums and social media platforms. While fieldnoting in multiple formats proved fruitful, cross-platform annotation would be impractical due to the breadth of outlets and technological limitations. Hence the decision to adopt an instant messaging application to centralize the research team's fieldnotes.

Technological resources can provide a middle ground between decentralized and centralized approaches. To capture the dynamics that unfold when Melissa shoes consumers are on their way towards becoming (or ceasing to be) fully devoted collectors, the research team decided to conduct a one-year intensive online fieldwork observation. Hence, the Slack platform was linked to Zapier – a web application that automates workflows across platforms – to capture the researchers' real-time interactions with informants on selected social media platforms. The primary data source was Instagram, complemented with Facebook and Twitter data to increase understanding of informants' actions across platforms. The Slack thread feature was used as a collective fieldnoting tool, and channels were also created for researcher's individual reflections. Combined insightful threads and reflections would feed into the general channel, allocated to analysis and interpretation notes (see Figure 35.5). These tailor-made platform integrations offered multi-level interaction between data and fieldnoting. This allowed the researchers to strike a balance between decentralized and centralized approaches to capturing, retrieving, organizing and systematizing fieldnotes.
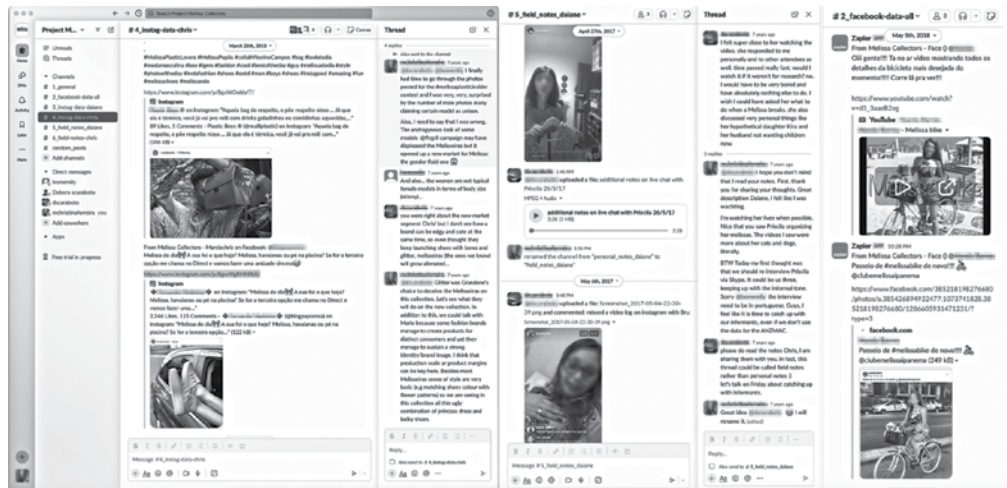

Figure 35.5   Archive: automated platform integration examples

Flexible fieldnoting can also be managed within qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). Software such as Atlas T.I., nVivo and MaxQDA are known for their ability to aggregate data in multiple formats. Their most recent releases include cloud-based collaborative annotation tools that improve team collaboration while facilitating data retrieval. In addition to Slack, other business communication platforms like Microsoft Teams and Mattermost (an open-source alternative) can also be used for archiving fieldnotes. Beyond note-taking applications (e.g. Evernote, OneNote), other online platforms offer collaborative fieldnotes tools, like Field Notes Community (www.fieldnotescommunities.com), SIL Fieldworks (https://software.sil.org/fieldworks) and Citavi (https://lumivero.com/products/citavi).

DISCUSSION

We have foregrounded accounts from researchers who have participated in fieldnoting to draw insights about the challenges and benefits of research in a dynamic and hybrid landscape**.** In doing so, we have conceptualized flexible fieldnoting as a way to navigate and be attentive to six axes of flexibility:

1. Location: Notes track the research process as it unfolds across various platforms and sites, allowing for both connected and disconnected recording methods.
2. Format: Data is captured in diverse formats, with researchers navigating between predefined or spontaneously chosen format ensembles (organic), enriching the documentation process.
3. Team: Fieldnoting can be solely limited to the team of researchers (closed) or collaborative, embracing the collective input from multiple researchers and other stakeholders in different locations.
4. Timing: Notes are taken either synchronously with the research activities (immediate) or after fieldwork (delayed), ensuring timely and reflective documentation.
5. Interaction: Researcher collaboration is either integrated or compartmentalized, fostering dynamic exchanges that influence the note-taking process.
6. Archive: The organization of notes ranges from scattered and dispersed across original platforms to centralized repositories, balancing accessibility with field relevance.

Whereas prior literature privileges the formal extremes of these axes (i.e. disconnected, planned, closed, delayed, compartmentalized and centralized), fieldnoting in our projects fall closer to the other extreme points (e.g. connected, organic, open, immediate, integrated and decentralized). We do not advocate for one or another approach, but for acknowledging these variations and allowing projects to vary across them, depending on the characteristics and dynamics of the focal field.

Flexible fieldnoting can be greatly facilitated by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), communication platforms and other collaborative tools. However, many software, such as Slack and 4K Stogram, have not been specifically designed to support flexible fieldnotes, and thus have limited functionality or are not committed to data preservation. To ensure that critical data is not lost due to changes in software features, a simple yet effective solution is to create backups of key items, such as offline PDF files and screenshots saved on cloud-based storage platforms or different hard drives.

CONCLUSION

Flexible fieldnoting is a powerful practice for conducting research in dynamic, hybrid and globalized research landscapes. By navigating the multiple dimensions of flexibility – from following the action where it is happening to encompassing multiple participants, being in the here-and-now, working interactively to create notes and archiving information in various formats – researchers can create a rich tapestry of layered notes that express the richness of fieldwork. While there are inherent tensions within each axis of flexibility, the benefits of using flexible fieldnotes far outweigh the challenges.

In this chapter, we have drawn examples of flexible fieldnoting from our own work. However, we believe fieldnoting can be useful for any research team in which multisited researchers aim to capture emerging digital phenomena across platforms and with multiple participants, such as TikTok Live contents expressing a consumer culture trend. Flexible fieldnoting allows researchers to navigate and capture the complex and dynamic nature of such phenomena. The first axis of flexibility, for example, notes the importance of following the multisited field, which is crucial for TikTok Live contents as they might involve interactions across multiple platforms. The second axis emphasizes the importance of creating fieldnotes in multiple formats, which is especially relevant for TikTok Live contents, as they often require understanding a wide range of consumer-generated data, including images, videos, live chats and sometimes offline action too (like actual retail experiences). The third axis highlights the participatory nature of such phenomena and the need to involve multiple researchers in the process of fieldnoting. The fourth emphasizes the importance of capturing the immediacy of the experience, which is essential for the often ephemeral and fleeting TikTok Live contents. The fifth axis stresses the importance of the iterative process, requiring interactions among different researchers. Finally, the sixth highlights the importance of building an archive, which is crucial where there is a need to capture, retrieve, organize and systemize fieldnotes to avoid data overload. Ultimately, flexible fieldnotes allow researchers to be more agile, responsive and creative in their research, enabling them to capture the complexities of the multiplatform, multiformat and multisited environments in which they operate.

Note: For further discussion on this topic, please access a podcast prepared by the authors here: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/1wi8gmkxkk46767mllurr/Flexible-Fieldnoting-Podcast.mp3?rlkey=gvxvmwoksw1n8s9tnrfwnq4e5&dl=0.

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