



ETHNOGRAPHY

UNDERSTANDING LIVED EXPERIENCES

Ethnographic research captures the complexity of distinctive behaviors that shape people's everyday lives and experiences.



W5 ON ETHNOGRAPHY

The ways in which consumers interact with products and services is more complex and subtle than ever before. To stay competitive and better attract and serve customers, brands need a marketing research approach specifically designed to make sense of consumers' lives, enabling development of relevant consumer-centered products and messaging.

Unlike other marketing research approaches, ethnography meets consumers where they live, be it in person or online. Ethnography involves engaging and observing consumers in the environments they inhabit every day (stores, restaurants, homes, etc.), allowing capture and interpretation of authentic responses as they occur.

When brands utilize ethnographic research they can incorporate consumers' experiences and values to develop more useful and inviting products, generate more authentic and relatable messaging, and cultivate a more personable and trustworthy brand.



HOME SHOPPER ETHNOGRAPHY

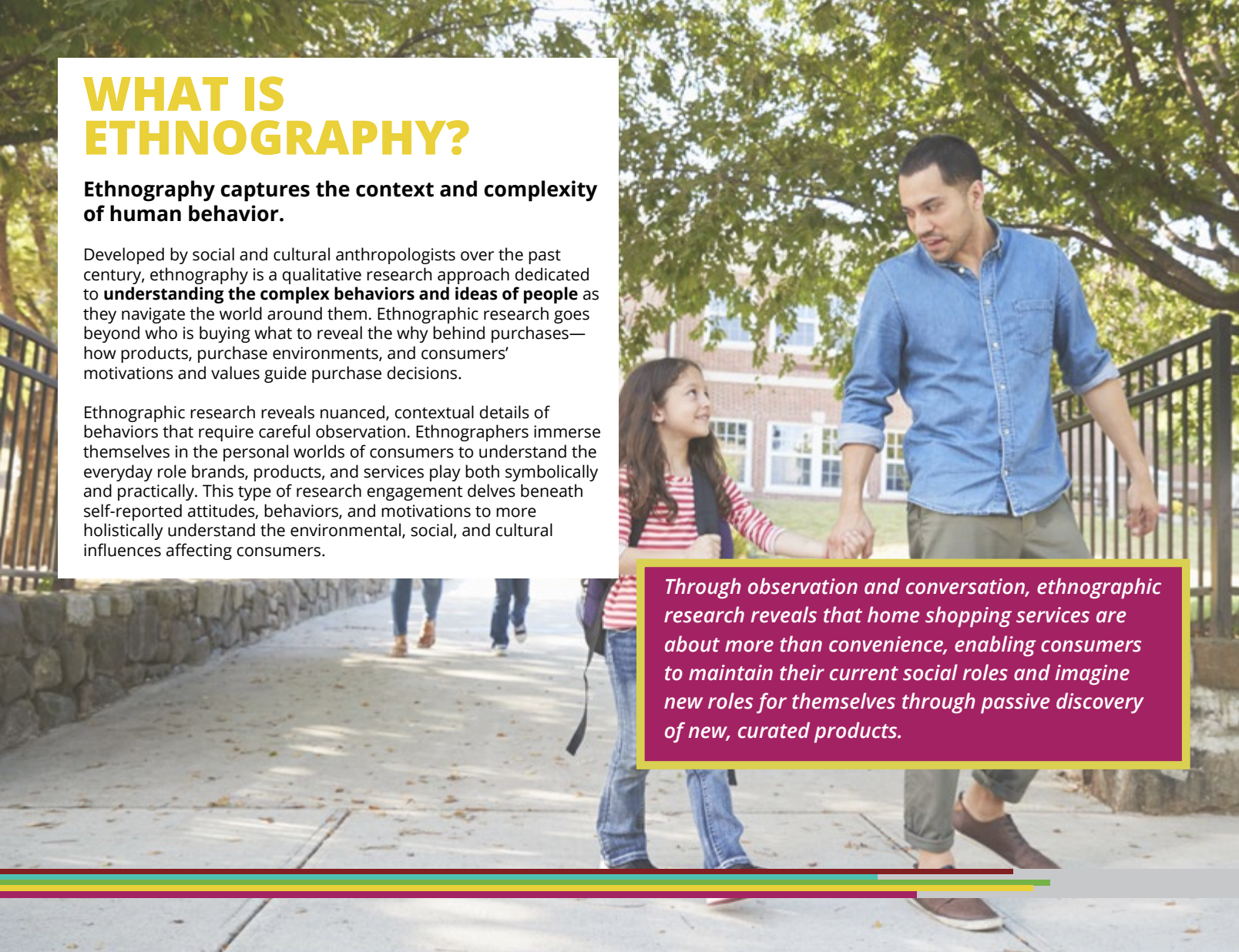
Ethnographic research can be used to better understand the shifting role of shopping channels, such as the expansion of personal shopping services tailored specifically to a consumer's individual taste. In-home observations and discussions offer deep insight into consumers' overall and channel-specific motivations, behaviors, needs, and preferences, creating a holistic portrait of how home shopping services fit into their lives.

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethnography captures the context and complexity of human behavior.

Developed by social and cultural anthropologists over the past century, ethnography is a qualitative research approach dedicated to **understanding the complex behaviors and ideas of people** as they navigate the world around them. Ethnographic research goes beyond who is buying what to reveal the why behind purchases—how products, purchase environments, and consumers' motivations and values guide purchase decisions.

Ethnographic research reveals nuanced, contextual details of behaviors that require careful observation. Ethnographers immerse themselves in the personal worlds of consumers to understand the everyday role brands, products, and services play both symbolically and practically. This type of research engagement delves beneath self-reported attitudes, behaviors, and motivations to more holistically understand the environmental, social, and cultural influences affecting consumers.



Through observation and conversation, ethnographic research reveals that home shopping services are about more than convenience, enabling consumers to maintain their current social roles and imagine new roles for themselves through passive discovery of new, curated products.

Consumers cannot recall each moment, thought, or instinctual reaction they experience when choosing or interacting with a brand, nor can they fully articulate how those brands fit within their broader lives. Ethnographic research is designed to reveal these highly contextual behaviors that require of-the-moment insights, enabling a more thorough understanding of how brands and interactions shape and are shaped by consumers' experiences and values.

With ethnographic insights, home shopping services can create communication and content strategies that align with the beliefs and lifestyles of their consumers. They can appeal to consumers' needs and aspirations because they understand the nuances of how home shopping services fit within their lives.



HOW DOES ETHNOGRAPHY WORK?

With ethnography, context is key. To understand how a brand resonates with consumers, ethnographers take a holistic approach, revealing both the underlying symbolic value of a brand—what the brand “means” to consumers—as well as opportunities for the brand moving forward—what the brand *could* mean to consumers.

Unlike simple observation, ethnographic analysis steps back to consider the role of environmental and sociocultural influences, from the symbolic value of the brand itself, to the ways the product performs, to the environments it inhabits, to broader trends in public perceptions and consumer values.

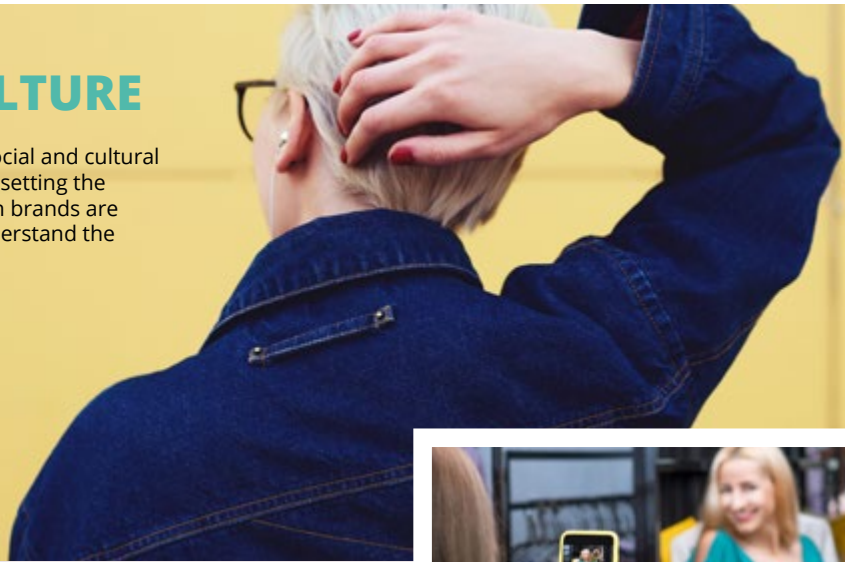
Ethnographic research combines these perspectives to reveal key insights into the conscious and subconscious motivations that shape the role a brand plays in consumers' lives.





SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Ethnographic research begins by establishing the social and cultural landscape in which the research subject is situated, setting the baseline by which interactions and associations with brands are perceived and evaluated. Ethnography seeks to understand the nuances of this influence.



Ethnographic research revealed the values shoppers bring to home shopping services are shaped by larger societal trends. In addition to access to online and mobile shopping, there have also been shifts in how consumers view and consume fashion, from “fast fashion” placing a premium on constantly staying ahead of the curve, to social media encouraging shoppers to keep up with friends and family. These shifts can create new challenges for online retailers and present new opportunities for home shopping services to help shoppers navigate the changing retail space.



ENVIRONMENT

Consumer encounters are often complex, shaped by the idiosyncratic contours of their environment, which must be accounted for to truly understand how, when, and where interactions fit within consumers' lives.

Observing consumers in their homes revealed that as home shoppers have embraced the shift from in-store to online shopping, they have also embraced key experiential components of in-person shopping, including the sense of discovery and exclusivity. While online shopping initially excelled as its own experience, shoppers are now moving toward services that offer components of an in-store experience in a home shopping setting.



BEHAVIORS, HABITS, & PRACTICES

Consumers use their preconceived perceptions to make sense of these everyday encounters, but their perceptions also grow and evolve as a result of everyday encounters. Ethnography seeks to uncover these moments of interaction and articulate how consumers' behaviors, habits, and practices shape, and are shaped by, those moments.

Ethnographic insights determined that home shopping services make consumers feel they are in the know. This insight becomes clear when ethnographers are able to witness, in the moment and in person, shoppers' emotional and physical reactions to new products.





BRAND

A holistic ethnographic approach ultimately reveals what a brand means to consumers. This symbolic significance is key to understanding the role brand equity plays in shaping consumers' engagement and can reveal opportunities to leverage or augment brand equity.

By combining observations and conversations, ethnographers discover a brand's meaning to consumers. Ethnographic research reveals that home shopping services can leverage symbolic associations with discovery and exclusivity to further differentiate their value within the home shopping retail category. To consumers, home shopping services serve as a convenient "secret weapon" for staying on top of trends and asserting their role as a stylish member of their circle.



TELEVISION
SHOPPING
NETWORK





JOURNALING

Journaling exercises reveal key details of consumers' daily encounters through routine exercises such as asking consumers to collect examples of websites they visit or advertisements they encounter, or more extensively asking consumers to visit and evaluate a particular store or shopping experience.

LIFELOGGING

Before discussion, consumers document a particular aspect of their lives over the course of days, encouraging mindfulness of certain encounters or experiences, enabling W5 ethnographers to unpack these rituals during discussions and ground consumers' responses in real events.

MOBILE EXPERIENCE DIARIES

During the course of multi-day online discussions, consumers track and document a particular, research-relevant aspect of their lives. This approach provides insight into some of the routine, daily experiences with brands, products, and messaging that shape perceptions and needs.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

W5 designs customized ethnographic research approaches which include discussion, journaling, and immersion components moderated by trained W5 ethnographers in-person, via immersive discussions, or digitally, via online and mobile platforms. Together these components provide depth, clarity, and richness to findings as a full, standalone research project or part of a larger study.



DISCUSSIONS

During organically moderated discussions, consumers describe and evaluate their thoughts and experiences, allowing W5 ethnographers to understand and articulate their personal perspective and values.

IN-PERSON

W5 ethnographers engage consumers one-on-one or in small groups in relevant settings, such as their homes or local stores. This in-context approach facilitates trust and allows observation of consumers' non-verbal, often subconscious cues.

WEBCAM DISCUSSIONS

W5 ethnographers connect face-to-face with consumers via webcam, providing access to a large, geographically dispersed array of consumers, including those in sparsely populated or remote areas.

DIGITAL DISCUSSION BOARDS

W5 ethnographers design and moderate a multi-day, asynchronous discussion via an online, mobile platform that allows consumers to respond to questions on their own time and from multiple devices. This approach provides access to a broad geographic mix of consumers and allows for extended conversations that evolve over the course of days, rather than hours.





IMMERSIONS

Immersion provides insight into consumers' experiences and interactions as they occur. W5 accompanies consumers as they perform tasks around their home, visit a location, or shop to observe subtle, instinctual, and reflexive behavior in context, revealing the nuances of consumer behavior.

IN-HOME

W5 ethnographers travel to consumers' homes to observe the fine details of consumers' surroundings as well as better understand their home life.

IN-STORE

W5 ethnographers shop for items with consumers and observe and discuss their experiences and perceptions along the way, revealing how consumers navigate store environments and how environments and their personal values influence in-store choices.

IN-CONTEXT

W5 ethnographers accompany consumers as they visit a particular venue, such as a concert or sporting event, or move through a designed space, such as a nature trail or theme park, to understand spaces as both physical and emotional experiences.

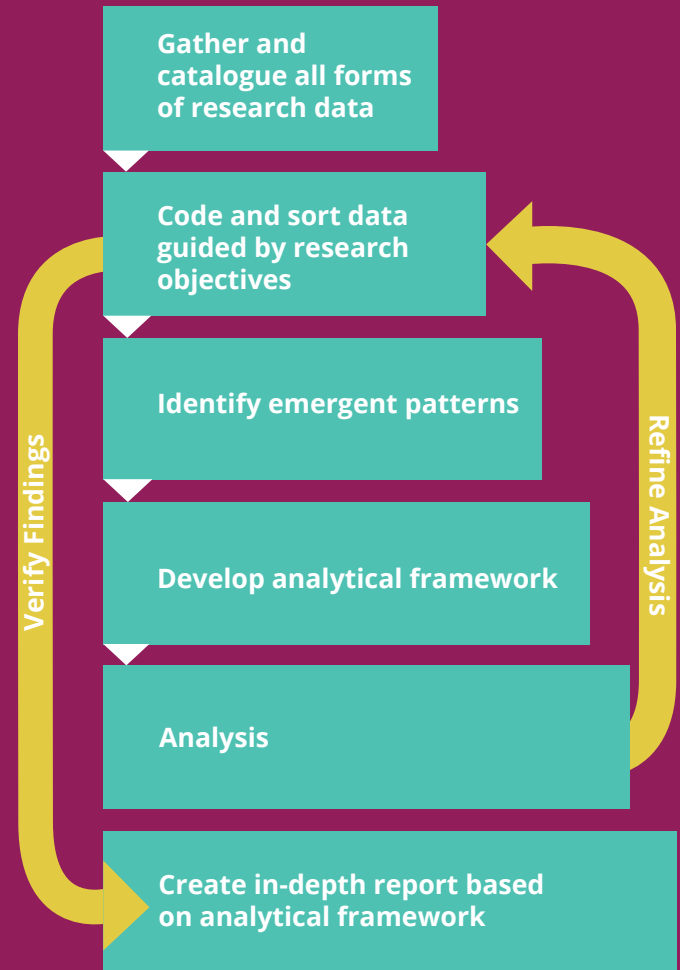
DIGITAL

Over the course of days or weeks, consumers use their mobile phone to complete customized missions (e.g., visit a store) and evaluation (e.g., photograph the most helpful/confusing/engaging signage). This untethered, autobiographical approach allows W5 to mobilize consumers as ethnographers in their own right, giving researchers remote access to intimate details about their experiences.

ANALYZING ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Ethnographers carefully catalogue, sort, and code collected responses and observations, from interview notes and audio recordings, to relevant documents, images, and videos to build an analytical framework identifying habits, preferences, themes, and trends.

Ethnographers collect multiple forms of data, including multimedia journal entries from home shoppers with interview responses and observations collected in their homes. These are organized and analyzed for emergent patterns, allowing ethnographers to create a multi-faceted and holistic portrait of consumers and the role of home shopping services in their lives.



TELLING ETHNOGRAPHIC STORIES

After completing all stages of analysis, an in-depth Final Report provides a detailed account of consumer behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions and the experiences on which those beliefs are built.

Final Reports present key insights, along with a full analysis of patterns and their social, cultural, and environmental drivers. All analyses are conducted to identify opportunities for product design and messaging that reflect their needs, experiences, and values.

In addition to a comprehensive Final Report, W5 often produces **Design Driven Deliverables*** to complement ethnographic findings. These carefully crafted and visually engaging deliverables use different forms of media and styles of communication to increase opportunities for stakeholders to engage with, circulate, and act upon research insights.



***Design Driven Deliverables** are custom print, video, and digital products designed to strategically communicate findings to specific audiences. For more information, see the latest W5 white paper on *Design Driven Deliverables*.





Ethnographic Videos: Filming consumer interviews and interactions provides an added layer of rich, audio/visual insights into analysis and reporting. W5 develops short, professionally produced and documented profiles, or highlight reels, providing engaging and easily distributed deliverables.



Immersive Displays: To better convey contextual nuances, W5 constructs immersive displays allowing clients to engage with key settings consumers navigate. These can be rooms or booths laden with objects and fine details that characterize participant environments.



Empathy Maps: These quick reference guides capture key consumer traits. They outline what consumers SAY, providing defining quotes and statements; DO, offering insights into typical actions and behaviors; and FEEL, exploring their attitudes, emotions, and values.



Shadow Boxes: Consumers' lives are punctuated with material objects and symbolic artifacts that shape their identity. Shadow boxes are contained collections of these artifacts, displayed in a museum-like, curated fashion, capturing visual and material qualities of consumer identities, adding tangible evidence to findings.



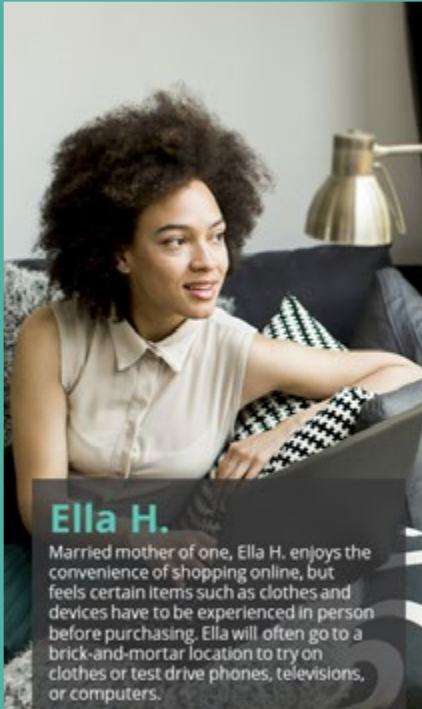
Journey Maps: Journey Maps identify and organize the multi-faceted influencers or touchpoints along the consumer path, communicating opportunities for leveraging strategic influence to increase consumer engagement and purchase practices.



Photo Journals: W5's experienced photographers capture engaging images that visually convey the nuances of consumers' lives and experiences. These images can be incorporated into presentations, printed as part of an exhibit display, or bound into a book and distributed among stakeholders.

CENTERING CONSUMER EXPERIENCES

Ethnographic research is based on the values and experiences of consumers, revealing the texture and nuance of their engagement with the world around them. When this consumer-centered research approach informs strategy, products and messaging resonate deeply with consumers' own lives providing empathy and understanding to develop authentic, consumer-driven products and messaging.



Ella H.

Married mother of one, Ella H. enjoys the convenience of shopping online, but feels certain items such as clothes and devices have to be experienced in person before purchasing. Ella will often go to a brick-and-mortar location to try on clothes or test drive phones, televisions, or computers.



- A) Light Fixture: Purchased using the TSN App
- B) Framed Art: Ordered through online catalog after in-store trip
- C) Laptop: Purchased using the TSN App
- D) Teal Skirt: Ordered after in-store trip for discovery and sizing

CASE STUDY

The advertising agency for an international producer of food and agricultural products was interested in better understanding consumer perceptions of the brand's food products in store. Insight into how consumers shopped for food products and perceived in-store organization and communication would guide the client's efforts to improve the retail experience, from shelf to table.

APPROACH

W5 employed a three-tiered qualitative research approach to capture the widest range of shopper perceptions and interactions with the products. To understand purchase planning, cooking, and preparation behaviors, W5 conducted a series of in-home interviews, pre-recruited shop-along interviews, and in-store intercepts with grocery store shoppers. Consumers were probed on pre- and post-grocery store shopping behaviors, organization and display of the client's food product, product quality, and effectiveness of in-store communications. This approach provided a holistic view of groceries and grocery shopping and how they fit into consumers' lives.

RESULTS

Based on extensive conversations with consumers in the home and grocery store environments, W5 advised on significant ways to improve the shopping experience. W5 learned many consumers were unaware of specific product preparation and cooking techniques and expressed a desire for greater guidance in product selection, preparation, and cooking options during the grocery shopping experience. W5 provided strategic guidance on how to improve the retail experience through communications that enhance consumers' product expertise and product organization to better reflect consumers' purchase goals.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

For what type of research is ethnography best suited?

Ethnography is exploratory and nuanced, best suited for detailed, evolving, and complex research questions that seek to understand the subtleties of consumer behaviors, experiences, and daily lives. Ethnography is frequently used to uncover process-intensive, context-specific interactions, such as those involved in navigating a space, purchasing an item, or experiencing a service.

What kinds of insights does ethnographic research reveal?

Ethnography is a holistic approach best suited to uncover insights at the intersection of who consumers are, how they feel, and how they behave. Ethnography helps make sense of the complex interplay of these factors to inform brand, product, and messaging strategy. Some examples of key ethnographic insights include:

- How consumers activate their values when choosing a product or service
- What kinds of messaging align with consumers' aspirations and experiences
- How consumers incorporate products and services into their daily routines
- What unmet needs or desires still exist for consumers, and how can brands craft products and messaging that appeal to those needs and desires

What makes ethnography different from other types of qualitative research?

Ethnographic research is unique as it takes place in the environmental context where consumers interact with brands, products, and services. It combines in-context observation with in-depth engagements to explore contradictions between what consumers say they do and how they actually behave, allowing for a more complete, holistic account of their perceptions and experiences.

W5 is a boutique custom marketing research firm. We focus on answering who, what, when, where, and why people relate to products, services, and brands. W5 conducts full-service marketing research and research strategy services for Fortune 500s and leading advertising agencies.

**Want to know more?
Visit our website at
www.W5insight.com**

**Contact us at inquiry@W5insight.com
or by phone at 919.932.1117
for more information**



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