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Netnography: A Method Specifically Designed to Study Cultures and Communities Online

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Abstract

With many people now using online communities such as newsgroups, blogs, forums, social networking sites, podcasting, videocasting, photosharing communities, and virtual worlds, the internet is now an important site for research. Kozinets' (2010) new text explores netnography, or the conduct of ethnography over the internet - a method specifically designed to study cultures and communities online. Guidelines for the accurate and ethical conduct of ethnographic research online are set out, with detailed, step-by-step guidance to thoroughly introduce, explain, and illustrate the method to students and researchers. Kozinets surveys the latest research on online cultures and communities, focusing on the methods used to study them, with examples focusing on the blogosphere (blogging), microblogging, videocasting, podcasting, social networking sites, virtual worlds, and more. The book is essential reading for researchers and students in social sciences.

Keywords

Netnography, Internet Research, Ethnography, Online Community, Research Methods

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Netnography: A Method Specifically Designed to Study Cultures and Communities Online

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With many people now using online communities such as newsgroups, blogs, forums, social networking sites, podcasting, videocasting, photosharing communities, and virtual worlds, the internet is now an important site for research. Kozinets' (2010) new text explores netnography, or the conduct of ethnography over the internet – a method specifically designed to study cultures and communities online. Guidelines for the accurate and ethical conduct of ethnographic research online are set out, with detailed, step-by-step guidance to thoroughly introduce, explain, and illustrate the method to students and researchers. Kozinets surveys the latest research on online cultures and communities, focusing on the methods used to study them, with examples focusing on the blogosphere (blogging), microblogging, videocasting, podcasting, social networking sites, virtual worlds, and more. The book is essential reading for researchers and students in social sciences. Key Words: Netnography, Internet Research, Ethnography, Online Community, and Research Methods

Introduction

Netnography is an excellent resource for the seasoned qualitative researcher and a useful entry point for the newcomer to qualitative research. Kozinets (2010) has written in a coherent and thought-through style, making this text accessible for a very wide market. He mostly steers clear of complicated and contrived jargon, and he gives clear explanations and provides useful examples where needed. The included glossary also serves as a handy reference for more unfamiliar terms. The author points to further reading and information sources at the close of each chapter for those seeking further knowledge on the topics covered in the book.

Kozinets (2010) writes, “Online communities form or manifest cultures, the learned beliefs, values and customs that serve to order, guide and direct the behavior of a particular society or group” (p. 12). As more and more people use the Internet, a growing number of them are utilizing it as a highly sophisticated communications device that enables and empowers the formation of communities. Online ethnography refers to a number of related online research methods that adapt to the study of the communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interaction. Prominent among these ethnographic approaches is “netnography” (Kozinets). As modifications of the term *ethnography*, online ethnography and virtual ethnography (as well as many other methodological neologisms) designate online fieldwork that follows from the conception of ethnography as an adaptable method. These methods tend to leave most of the specifics of the adaptation to the individual researcher. The author of *Netnography* suggests the use of specific procedures and standards, and he argues for consideration of

particular consensually-agreed upon techniques, justifying the use of a new name rather than a modification of the term *ethnography*.

By whatever name, all ethnographies of online cultures and communities extend the traditional notions of field and ethnographic study, as well as ethnographic cultural analysis and representation, from the observation of co-located, face-to-face interactions to technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities, and the culture (or cyberculture) shared between and among them (Kozinets, 2010). In doing so, these techniques are founded in the sense that traditional notions of a field site as a localized space are outdated. Kozinets suggests that ethnographic fieldwork can be meaningfully applied to computer-mediated interactions, an assertion that some have contested, but which is increasingly becoming accepted.

A number of researchers have conducted ethnographies of online cultures and communities that are purely observational, in which the researcher is a specialized type of lurker (Kozinets, 2010). However, other researchers have emphasized a more participative approach, in which the researcher fully participates as a member of the online community. This latter approach is closer to traditional ethnographic standards of participant observation, prolonged engagement, and deep immersion. In many of its renderings, netnography maintains the values of traditional ethnography through providing a Geertzian sense of "thick description" through the "immersion" of the researcher in the life of the online culture or community (Kozinets). This focus on participation and immersion makes these approaches quite distinct from Web usage or social network analysis, although ethnographers may use similar techniques to identify or map networks (Kozinets).

In Chapter 1 Kozinets (2010) describes what exactly are online cultures and communities, and why they are important topics for social scientists. From the beginning, the online social environment was viewed with suspicion and cynicism, as a context that created task-oriented, "impersonal", "inflammatory", "cold", and "unsociable interactions" (Kozinets, p. 23). Over time, research cast doubt on these suppositions. Analysis of the actual content of Computer-Mediated Communications (CMC) started to reveal discrepancies in this work. In the physical world, communities are typically groups of people (a town, for instance) held together by some common identity or interest. The same holds true for virtual or online communities in that they, too, are comprised of people with shared identity or interests coming together for a shared purpose. This shared interest or intent offers a strong forum for members of the community to build relationships and affiliations out of which they can learn from one another and make an impact on the society or culture around them.

In the second chapter Kozinets (2010) provides a general overview of the existing research on online cultures and communities, and he mentions some of the most important and influential research from the fields of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, consumer research and other fields. Kozinets recommends distinguishing between newbies, minglers, devotees, and insiders when analyzing messages from online community members. Newbies lack strong social ties to the group and maintain a superficial or passing interest in the consumption activity. Minglers maintain strong social ties, but are only perfunctorily interested in the central consumption activity. Devotees maintain a strong interest in the consumption activity, but have few social attachments to the group. Finally, insiders have strong social ties to the group and

maintain a strong interest in the central consumption activity. Kozinets highlights devotees and insiders as the most enthusiastic, actively involved and sophisticated users and thus as the most important data sources for researchers.

Kozinets (2010) points out in Chapter 3 that various methodologies have been used in order to perform research on online communities. Research methods should always be driven by the researcher's objective and research questions. The type of data collected should be matched to the type of question the researcher is trying to answer; likewise, the researcher should utilize the methodological approach best fitted to the level of analysis, constructs and type of data (Kozinets). Many methods are complementary with netnography. Kozinets writes, "Netnography, like an older sibling, ethnography, is promiscuous. It attaches itself to and incorporates a vast variety of different research techniques and approaches" (p. 42). Some of the methods used to examine different aspects of online communities and cultures include the following: surveys, interviews, journals, focus groups, structural network analysis and ethnography.

Kozinets (2010) proceeds with a more detailed description of netnography in Chapter 4. He mentions the history and nature of the method, defines terms and provides an overview of how the method has been used and adapted in particular contexts by citing various research studies that have used the method.

Netnography follows six steps of ethnography: research planning, *entrée*, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation (Kozinets, 2010). Kozinets further describes the following two important areas prior to following the six steps of ethnography: First, the researcher needs to understand when and how to combine ethnography, which uses data gathered through in-person or face-to-face cultural interactions, with netnography, which uses data gathered through online interactions. Second, the researcher needs to understand the differences of the online social environment, in order to appropriately and consistently guide the adaptation of ethnographic techniques.

Referring to common ethnographic procedures, Kozinets (2010) recommends the following methodological stages and procedures for netnographic studies: *Entrée*: formulation of research questions and identification of appropriate online community for a study. Data collection: direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings. Analysis and interpretation: classification, coding analysis and contextualization of communicative acts. He points out that all of these steps must be taken in accordance with research ethics which are discussed later in the text in more detail.

Kozinets (2010) begins Chapter 5 with a more detailed exploration of the netnographic approach by looking at planning, focus and *entrée*. This chapter provides specific guidelines to teach the online cultural researcher how to plan, focus and begin a netnographic study. *Entrée* includes the formulation of research questions and identification of an appropriate online community for a study. Before you enter that online culture and begin your participation, there are a few important things to cover. You need to decide exactly what it is that you are going to be studying, how you are going to study it, how you are going to represent yourself, how you are going to handle this project ethically and just how much of a disruption you are going to create in the communities or cultures you are studying.

Kozinets (2010) demonstrates how to construct and focus research questions appropriate for netnography and offers guidelines for writing broad research questions to guide qualitative inquires (p. 81).

- Ask one or two central questions followed by no more than seven related sub-questions.
- Relate the central question to the specific qualitative strategy of inquiry.
- Begin the research questions with the words “what” or “how” to convey an open-ended and emergent research design.
- Focus on a single phenomenon or concept.
- Use exploratory verbs such as “discover”, “understand”, “explore”, “describe”, or “report”.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Specify the participants and the research site for study.

An example in the chapter presents the way Michelle Nelson and Cele Otnes (2005) represent their research question in their netnographic article in the *Journal of Business Research*:

We explore the ways virtual communities help brides-to-be manage cross-cultural ambivalence as they plan their weddings. We address the following two research questions:

- (1) What roles do wedding message boards play for brides as they plan cross-cultural weddings?
- (2) How do brides use these Internet communities to cope with the cross-cultural ambivalence they experience? (p. 90)

When they report their conclusions, Nelson and Otnes use positioning terms such as: “this research examined” and “we identify.” These are exploratory verbs (Kozinets, p. 94).

Kozinets (2010) suggests guidelines for netnographic fieldwork. He purports that you should look for online communities that are: (a) relevant, they relate to your research focus and question(s), (b) active, they have recent and regular communications, (c) interactive, they have a flow of communications between participants, (d) substantial, they have a critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel, (e) heterogeneous, they have a number of different participants, and (f) data-rich, offering more detailed or descriptive rich data (p. 89).

Kozinets (2010) discusses and illustrates particular approaches to the capture of online community and cultural data in Chapter 6. Netnography is participant-observation research, and the data can take three forms: (a) data the researcher directly collects, (b) data generated through the capture and recording of online community events and interactions; and (c) data the researcher sketches as field notes (Kozinets). Data collection involves direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online

community members and observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings.

Kozinets (2010) follows the discussion of data collection with an explanation of netnography's data analysis and interpretation in Chapter 7. He covers grounded theory and inductive coding procedures. The more interpretive and holistic "hermeneutic circle" approaches to data analysis are also mentioned. Analysis and interpretation involves classification, coding analysis and contextualization of communicative acts. Kozinets presents the following principles of analyzing qualitative data:

- Proceed systematically and rigorously (minimise human error)
- Record process, memos, journals, etc.
- Focus on responding to research questions
- Appropriate level of interpretation appropriate for situation
- Time (process of inquiry and analysis are often simultaneous)
- Seek to explain or enlighten
- Evolutionary/emerging

He also presents aspects of the data to consider in the course of data analysis and describes elements of the data analysis procedures. In addition, Kozinets offers helpful suggestions related to data analysis, such as focusing not on the objective meaning of text, but on the meaning of that text for people in the situation under study, and remembering to try to bracket self out in analysis-- that is, to tell their story, not yours as the researcher, as well as a number of other useful tips.

In Chapter 8, Kozinets (2010) covers research ethics and compares how these apply to traditional ethnography and netnography. He advocates that to conduct netnography in accordance with research ethics: (a) the researcher should fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research; (b) the researcher should ensure confidentiality and anonymity of informants; and (c) the researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched. He also suggests that the researcher should take a cautious position on the issue of whether the online environment is a private or public medium. The researcher should contact community members and obtain their permission (informed consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research. Likewise, the researcher should employ member checking by presenting some or all of the final research report's findings to the people who have been studied in order to solicit their comments.

In the final chapters of the book, Kozinets (2010) covers research representation and the evaluation of the netnographic approach, as well as changes and advances in the netnographic approach. Overall, this book would equally reward someone reading from cover to cover, or those just seeking quick reference material and information from any of the focused chapters. This is a welcome and timely addition to this growing and increasingly influential field. This book serves as a guide to conduct ethnographic research online with detailed, step-by-step guidance to introduce, explain and illustrate the method to students and researchers. I highly recommend the text to anybody seeking knowledge, techniques, methods, and ethical guidelines for studying communities and cultures online. Kozinets uses humor, compassion and intelligence, as well as an

understandable vocabulary and helpful examples and illustrations to make the book inviting to read and accessible. This book is a definite must for anyone interested in understanding or conducting “netnography”.

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Author's Note

Dr. Bowler has worked as a Licensed School Psychologist for the past eight years in Chicopee Public Schools District located in Chicopee, Massachusetts. Prior to this, he worked as a Forensic Clinician at the Hampden County Correctional Center located in Ludlow Massachusetts for nine years. Bowler graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 1992 with a B.S. psychology. He earned a M. A. in Clinical Psychology in 1995, Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies (C.A.G.S.) in School Psychology in 1998 and a M.A. in Educational Psychology in 2001 from American International College in Springfield, Massachusetts. Bowler received a doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) in 2007 from Nova Southeastern University. He is currently enrolled in a Graduate Certificate Program in Qualitative Research at Nova Southeastern University. Gary can be reached at bowlerjrf@gmail.com

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