Chapter 85

Netnography:
An Assessment of a Novel Research Approach and its Underlying Philosophical Assumptions

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the Internet has facilitated many new forms of communication and thus has laid the foundation for new forms of interaction and social organization. The challenges of gaining insight into the social processes that occur in these newly emerging digital spaces require the development of new research approaches and methodologies. Netnography, or Internet ethnography, is one such example. It focuses on gaining cultural insights from virtual community environments and was originally developed for consumer research in the field of marketing, but has since been used in a number of other fields, including urban planning. This chapter examines the philosophical assumptions and specific methods of netnography as a newly emerging research approach. Findings from a qualitative analysis of ten cases of published netnography studies reveal differences in both philosophical assumptions and uses as a research methodology, including the subject of research – community – and the role of the researcher. The chapter closes with some recommendations and a call for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has been transformational with introducing new methods of communication and collaboration. The Internet has brought about numerous new forms of communication – including instant messaging, online forums, blogs, massively multiplayer online gaming environments, and online social networks. The new communication channels show new communication patterns and also lead to the formation of new types of online communities. These communities are enabled and empowered by the new technology, but they also have to wrestle with technology limitations. In many cases the communities evolve language and culture that help manage the tensions and the limitations of electronic communication, which tends to strip most non-verbal cues (posture, tone, eye contact, etc.) from communicative exchanges.

The evolution of new forms of communication, online communities, as well as the associated cultural and linguistic artifacts offers an opportunity to learn about a broad spectrum of research questions, covering a wide range of online communities, from product co-creation in sports oriented online communities to peer-support in plastic surgery related online discussion forums. The development of online communities and new online cultures creates a need for new research methods that are specifically suited for research in this new environment.

Netnography, or online ethnography, is such a new research approach, with its own methodological issues, that is growing in popularity. It was originally developed by Robert Kozinets for consumer research in the field of marketing (Kozinets, 1998), but has since been used in a number of other fields, including urban planning. Netnography applies and adopts traditional ethnographic techniques to the online context, with a particular focus on gaining cultural insights from virtual community environments. Kozinets is frequently cited by studies employing netnographic methodology as a definitive reference on the proper methodological procedure. However, netnography is not a stand-alone approach but an interpretive research methodology that inherits many philosophical assumptions from ethnography.

The present work examines the origins, critical philosophical assumptions, and specific methods of netnography for the study of cultural issues in online communities. In particular, we report the findings of a qualitative multi-case study using content analysis of published netnographic studies, highlighting the similarities and differences arising from varying philosophical viewpoints. The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows. The next section reviews the genesis of netnography, including the philosophical inheritance from ethnography, as well as recent developments relevant to netnography. The following section explains the method used in our own analysis, including sample case selection and qualitative content analysis. Then we present the results for each study separately, followed by a broader cross-case discussion. Finally, we offer some conclusions and recommendations.

THE GENESIS OF NETNOGRAPHY

The Philosophical Roots of Ethnography

Ethnographies seek to gain insight into communities and cultures. The outcome of an ethnographic study is typically a rich description of the culture under study emphasizing the unique patterns of communications, behavior, and cultural artifacts that are present in the target community. Ethnographies are inherently interpretive from the philosophical point of view. In order to conduct an ethnography, a researcher must immerse herself in the community and become an integral part of it in order to gain an inside view (Tedlock, 2000). Immersion occurs following a cultural entry by the researcher and through prolonged membership that leads to the researcher's acceptance into the

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