Advances in Internet Research Methods—Netnography
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Abstract

Introduction

Netnography, also called "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000), is a branch of traditional ethnography. It allows researchers to produce in-depth accounts of the complex phenomena of Internet cultural and social values (Kozinets, 1998, 2001, 2002). Although netnography seems simple enough (some researchers believe that they can just sit his computer and gather data online), Reid (1995) argues that online interactions become meaningless when removed from virtual community. There are two major drawbacks in the early netnography practices: (1) identities (e.g., gender, age or occupation, etc.) of online participants are difficult to confirm, and (2) researchers cannot immediately communicate or discuss with online participants about relevant issues.

Hence, Hine (2000), Marvin (1995) and Paccagnella (1997) strongly suggest that a netnographer should not to act like a "lurker" online. Likewise, Kozinets (1998) suggests that Nethnography, which combines traditional ethnographic methods (e.g., traveling, paper-and-pencil notes and face-to-face interviews) with new online methods (e.g., participant-observations online, e-mail exchanges and online immediately interviews), is superior in utilizing Internet research. This article attempts to introduce the concept and development of Netnography, elucidate the author's practical Internet research experience and further provide reflections and suggestions, looking forward to seeing the other researchers to abound in this field.

Research design and results

In this research, the online game “SheSay” (http://www.shesay.com) was chosen as the research object of netnographic study. The idea of SheSay is to challenge Confucian male chauvinism. In this game, female players are called “masters”, and male players are “pets”. While female players are entitled to select and keep pets, their male counterparts, pets, can only wait to be picked. Male players have to please female players in the hope to be picked and allowed to talk with their masters. However, if a master does like her pet anymore, she can just finish her relationship with the pet or “terminate his life” at will. Although there is a chat room for pets to complain about their masters, the only right a pet possesses is to commit “suicide” when he feel his master treats him badly and can not tolerate that anymore. Simply
put, SheSay tries to subvert traditional gender roles in Taiwan. And the author believes that, an online game like this can help Taiwan become a gender equity society.

Most of the registered players of SheSay were students or office workers, who were aged from 16 to 30. Thirty respondents, all of whom had played the game for a year or more, were recruited from the online community of SheSay through purposive sampling: the author posted a recruitment massage on the billboard of SheSay and used snowballing sampling to expand the sample. The data was collected in a period of three years (2001-2004).

The research was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, from July to September in 2001, the author, just like other online researchers, did not consider it a necessity to participate online interactions. Therefore, though already a registered player of SheSay and even played the role as a master occasionally, the author remained an observer (or lurker) most of the time in this stage. And she tried hard to keep a distance from the interactions she observed. In the mean time, the author asked the thirty players to submit self-report weekly to supplement her observations. While some scholars were suspicious of the validity of self-report, the results of this study confirmed Belk’s research (1988): respondents are usually reluctant to reveal their thoughts in the beginning; however, after trust is established, they would be more willing to share their secrets with the researcher.

In the second stage (from October 2001 to October 2002), the emphasis was for the author to gain more experience as a player—She became an active participant in SheSay and created three accounts (using three different identities). During this period of time, the author experienced emotions which a player would have. At the same time, a new issue emerged: having a different idea about the interactions among the players now, the author wondered if an online is really only a game. Subsequently, she felt the need to conduct offline observations and face-to-face interviews, which brought the research to the next stage.

Realizing that players’ self-reports may not be truthful, the author found it necessary to conduct offline observation and face-to-face interview in the third stage (from November 2002 to July 2004). Thus, she decided to use “emergent design” to refine the research design: the thirty players as well as some of their friends, colleagues, classmates, parents, etc. were invited to interviews. At the same time, the author joined the players’ activities to observe their offline behaviors. In this stage, therefore, the author had the opportunity to clarify issues which emerged in the first two stages.
Conclusion

From this study, it is clear that judgment and sensitivity are crucial in applying netnography. Indeed, netnography is flexible in terms of research design, but those who use this methodology must keep examining themselves and modify research design during the research to avoid being biased. In netnographic studies, although researchers are supposed to involve themselves in netizens’ experiences and emotions, they still have to conduct research as objectively as possible. To achieve these two conflicting goals, the author adopted the following approaches: “experience-near” (proposed by Geertz in 1973)—experience netizens’ behaviors and emotions as a member of the virtual community, and “experience far”—read relevant studies and join academic conferences.

Finally, it should be pointed out that for those interested in doing online research, “online research ethics” can be a serious issue. In this research, when the “emergent design” was used in third stage, the players’ parents, friends, etc. were recruited for interviews. And this raised the issue of “online research ethics”: the mother of one player, worried about her son’s online activities, kept asking the author to reveal what her son has done online. However, the author had to decline such requests because of research ethics. It is important for a Netnography researcher to stick to research ethics closely, and he or she should not obtain online/offline information from Netizens by means of any unjust behavior.

Reference


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