

Ethnographic Alternatives for Dialogic Marketspaces

Man Zhang¹⁺ and Nikhilesh Dholakia¹

¹ University of Rhode Island

Abstract. The paper aims to examine the existing literatures on online ethnography, identify the challenges and opportunities to evolve ethnographic approaches, and extend existing ways of doing online ethnography into new directions. The paper argues that online ethnography should take advantage of the opportunities offered by Web 2.0 and the imminent Web 3.0, and address the challenges it faces. The key contributions of this paper are: (1) A review of existing online ethnographic methods from the perspective of fast-transforming online environments, and (2) Proposing of new directions for online ethnographic methods.

Keywords: Online consumption; Netnography; Virtual ethnography; Digital ethnography.

1. Introduction

As of April of 2011, there were nearly 2.09 billion Internet users worldwide [1]. More importantly, contemporary Internet users are not passively consuming published contents of webpages. Rather, they are actively communicating with one another and often creating content. They are using social media to deepen their social alliances and affiliations. Along with these changes in social communication and behaviours, consumption is increasingly combining conventional and physical “marketplace” with the online “marketspace” [2]. Such evolving online consumption spaces confound traditional ethnographic methods of capturing and examining the cultural context in which consumption occurs. The ethnographic research landscape has changed dramatically since the inception of Web 2.0. In recent years, the approaches in the ethnographic study of the Internet have been diverse, with a proliferation of proposals on using online ethnography.

This paper focuses on the examination of online ethnographic methods and aims to offer some guidance for future research. Specifically, next section reviews existing online ethnographic methods from the perspective of fast-transforming online environments. Then, several new directions for online ethnographic methods are proposed. A section with summary and concluding comments wraps up the paper.

2. Review of Existing Online Ethnographic Methods

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 interactions. Over the past decade, an impressive body of research work in marketing and consumer studies using online ethnographic methods have been published in top level journals and made contributions to the development of marketing discipline.

Online ethnography, however, is under pressure from conflicting opinions concerning its fundamental assumptions (Are the online consumption space, communities, cultures are exotic and fundamentally different than everyday communication?), procedures (How to do fieldwork, observation, data collection?), and appropriate terminology of “online ethnography” (Whether it should be called “netnography”, “virtual ethnography”, or “digital ethnography?”).

⁺ Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 5185959899; fax: +1 4018744312
E-mail address: manzhang@mail.uri.edu

In the sub-sections that follow, we offer brief reviews of four main methods of online ethnography. Of course, these are by no means exhaustive in terms of this methodological domain, but they do represent major alternative approaches.

2.1. Virtual Dasein: Existing in Exotic Cyberspace/cyberculture

In his article “Virtual Dasein: Ethnography in Cyberspace” [3], Varisco recognizes the Internet has become a part of everyday life, but he argues that “Cyberculture as an imagined space escapes the philosophical stalemate in the representation of reality problem, because it is obviously a recognizable byproduct of technology, and distinctly a superorganic mode of relating to the imagined selves of other people.” He concludes that “except for the demonstrable ways in which interaction on the Internet or in virtual reality games affects human social behavior, cyberculture only exists as a simulation. Online personalities are merely constructed and inevitably ephemeral”.

To Varisco, the online fieldwork that occurs beyond the conventional spatial and temporal ethnographic boundaries fits in the concept of “being here and also being there”, or the idea of *Virtual Dasein*. Researchers need to have some level of technological expertise in computing and information technology (IT) to conduct the fieldwork, with the expertise levels rising as web exploration deepens.

2.2. Netnography

Introduced by Kozinets in 1997 [4], netnography designates an interpretative method devised specifically to investigate the consumer cultures and communities present on the internet. Kozinets suggests that conventional ethnographic fieldwork can be meaningfully applied to computer-mediated interactions. The fieldwork includes direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings [5]. The data collected is mainly textual such as downloaded files of newsgroup postings, transcripts of MUD (multi-user dungeons) or IRC (Internet relay chat) sessions, and e-mail exchanges. As Kozinets [6] suggests, netnography investigates the specific instance in which community is formed through computer-mediated communications.

Based on conventional ethnographic procedures, Kozinets [7] recommends the five methodological stages and procedures for netnographic studies that include: (1) formulation of research questions and identification and gaining entree to appropriate online communities and cultures, (2) data collection that consists of the researcher’s field notes and the artifacts of the culture or community, (3) data analysis with focus on the cultural contextualizing of online data and classification, coding analysis and contextualization of communicative acts, (4) ensuring research ethnics by which netnography uses cultural information that is not given specifically to the researchers, and (5) research representation with focus on member checks to solicit other researchers’ opinions.

2.3. Virtual Ethnography

Virtual ethnography extends the notions of field and ethnographic observation from the exclusive study of co-present and face to face interactions, to a focus on mediated and distributed ones [8]. Instead of going to particular physical field site, virtual ethnography focuses more on online field connections. Although virtual ethnography is conducted using a predominance of (if not exclusively) online data, proponents of virtual ethnography argue that this does not undermine the quality and depth of the “thick description” generated. Hine suggests that researchers need to be mobile both virtually and physically so as to be fully engaged in the ethnography of mediated interaction. In contrast to conventional ethnography that emphasizes long term immersion in the culture being studied, virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement rather than long term immersion; thus, it allows the researchers to perform a comparative ethnography of more than one site at the same time. Since the early virtual ethnography studies, e.g., ethnography of WolfMOO by Rosenber 1992 [9] were of text based virtual worlds, the data were mostly texts. Boellstorff [10] notes that there is an emerging set of virtual ethnographies that are graphically based (e.g., Second Life).

Hine does not give prescriptive and exhaustive set of rules on how to do virtual ethnography. Later, Hair and Clark [11] identify a procedure for conducting virtual ethnography that includes: (1) identifying

proactive communities, negotiating access, (2) interacting with participants, (3) conducting electronic depth interviews, (4) data interpretation, and (5) returning results and analysis to the community.

2.4. Digital Ethnography

In 2003, Masten and Plowman [12] characterized digital ethnography as “next wave in understanding the consumer experience,” as “Digital Ethno enables participants to convey the real-time richness of their own lives and environments.” The proponents of digital ethnography argue that with the Web 2.0 increasingly permeating people’s daily lives and people increasingly accessing Web and engaging online communities on the go, the term netnography fails to capture the essence of consumer consumption environment that features ubiquitous digital devices [13]. In the era of Web 2.0, much of online ethnographic methods including netnography and virtual ethnography are generally text-based techniques transplanted onto the internet; in that sense, they are not inherently or natively digital [12]. Besides the conventional participant observation and passive observation, digital ethnography focuses on the participant self-reporting. As Masten and Plowman suggest, putting the power of observation in the participants’ own hands benefits the ethnographic research in two ways. One benefit is that of allowing participants to convey the real-time richness of their own lives and environments. Second, rather than simply acting as the source of data, participants get involved in the research process and share their insights on the topic being studied. Compared with mostly text-based data collected by netnography and virtual ethnography, the details of participants’ experience, in the form of words, images, or audio/video files are collected by digital ethnography. The various types of data enable the researchers to conduct deep and richer analyses [12].

2.5. Discussion

In recent years the voices challenging the division between the cyberspace and “place” have grown in intensity. Kozinets [5] argues that “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”. If the social construction of what technology is and how it is bounded off from the social, are prior ontological events, then the so-called individual projections about technology must be artifacts of that social construction, not of the subsequently defined element labeled ‘technology’.

Also, along with the online and offline life increasingly combining and inter-blending, some online ethnographic methods such as netnography and virtual netnography appear to have narrow focus on online interactions about offline lives; and cannot capture the full and rich detail of the emergent Web 3.0 consumer experience. Data collection by netnography and virtual ethnography is limited to text based data, which also is problematic when people are increasingly getting into the graphic based virtual worlds and ubiquitous computing environment of Web 2.0 – a trend that Web 3.0 would intensify. Online ethnographic methods have been applied to online communities and culture for over a decade and, along the way, different researchers have used different terms (e.g., netnography, virtual ethnography, digital ethnography, webnography, webservation) to describe their research. As Kozinets [5] argues that if these terms signal something significantly different, then different terms may be needed; but if all these terms signal same things, then the proliferation of terminology leads to needless confusions.

3. New Directions for Development of Online Ethnographic Methods

Online ethnographic methods provide frameworks for undertaking ethnographic research in the Web 2.0 and future Web 3.0 environments. The present Web 2.0 and the emergent Web 3.0 open up new opportunities for the development of online ethnographic methodology. Also these transitions present new challenges. To further advance the online ethnographic methodology, we propose some new directions of online ethnographic methods in the following sub-sections.

3.1. Research Questions and Method Selection

As Sunderland and Denny [14] contend, “the methodologies employed, whether participant observation, focus groups, in-depth interviews, diaries (online or offline), village censuses, surveys, or maps, “are not ‘ethnographic’ per se, but...are made so by the intellectual framing of the task”. In future studies, it is crucial

for researchers to understand the relationship between research question at hand and method and choose the ethnographic or other approaches accordingly [15]. Boellstorff [16] classifies three research questions regarding virtual world in Web 2.0: (1) interface between virtual world and actual world, (2) interface between virtual words and another virtual world, and (3) single virtual world. Accordingly, researchers need to focus on combined online/offline context for research question type 1, and online contexts for research questions 2 and 3. If a researcher would like to study the consumer culture in Second Life, he or she should study the connection between actual consumer behaviors and consumer behavior in that virtual world to get meaningful results.

3.2. Digital Based Online Ethnographic Methodology

With the change from text based data in Web1.0 to multimedia data in era of Web 2.0 and coming Web 3.0, the ethnographic methods must adapt accordingly. Online ethnographic methodology must change from text based perspective to digital perspective – with whatever sensory and mediated form the digital content takes. With the graphic ability to engage with people via an App on their mobile phone and other digital devices, researchers can do just electronic interviews or online observations. Researchers can ask people to take pictures, record audio, tag a GPS coordinate, and generate rich, though often unwieldy data. By getting participants involved in the process of research, online ethnography can get much more insightful results.

3.3. Digital Ethnography as Umbrella Terminology

Though the argument by Kozinets that other online ethnographic methods (e.g., virtual ethnography, digital ethnography, web ethnography) are adoption and adaption of netnography with different names is debatable, having an umbrella terminology for online ethnographic methodology is desirable. As Kozinets points out “it can help an emerging, growing scholarship to have a unifying stance and language... also encourage the sharing of knowledge between disparate academic fields.” In this paper, we endorse the point of view offered by Irons [13] that digital ethnography is the most fitting umbrella terminology, since it captures the essence of the ubiquitous computing environments in the era of Web 2.0 and future Web 3.0.

4. Conclusion

New developments in Web 2.0 have raised important questions for conducting and developing online ethnographic methodologies. Attention has traditionally focused on the new context of online environments. This paper examines the existing online ethnographic methodologies along with the evolution of the online consumption space over decades. These methodologies present different merits and limitations. We suggest that future online ethnography should take new directions: choosing methodology based on the research question at hand, collecting various formats of (multimedia) data to generate richer content – with greater involvement of those studied, having a unifying umbrella terminology of ‘digital ethnography’ to standardize the stance and language of the interested disciplines, and further researching the possible impact of technology on consumer culture. With the advent of Web 3.0 which features the semantic web, we believe online ethnographic methodology would develop further and faster, and in multiple and multivocal ways, to describe the online consumption cultures.

5. References

- [1] Internetworldstats. World Internet Users and Population Stats. Internetworldstats, 31 March, 2011. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (Accessed Oct 15, 2011).
- [2] J.F. Rayport, and J. Sviokla. Managing in the marketspace. *Harvard Business Review*. 1994, 72 (6): 141-150.
- [3] D.M. Varisco. Virtual Dasein: Ethnography in cyberspace. *Cyber Orient*. 2007, 2 (1): 34-37.
- [4] R.V. Kozinets. I want to believe: A netnography of the X-Philes' subculture of consumption. *Advances in Consumer Research*. 1997, 24: 470-475.
- [5] R.V. Kozinets. *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Sage Publications, 2010.
- [6] R.V. Kozinets. On netnography: Initial reflections on consumer research investigations of cyberculture. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 1998, 25: 366-71.

- [7] R.V. Kozinets. The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*. 2002, 39 (1): 61-72.
- [8] C. Hine. *Virtual Ethnography*. Sage Publications, 2000.
- [9] M. Rosenberg. *Virtual reality: Reflections of life, dreams, and technology- An ethnography of a computer society*. Unpublished manuscript. 1992.
- [10] T. Boellstorff. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton University Press, 2008.
- [11] N.Hair, and M. Clark. An enhanced Virtual Ethnography: the Role of Critical Theory. *Proc of 3rd International Critical Management Studies Conference*. Lancaster, United Kingdom. 2003.
- [12] D. Masten, and T. Plowman. Digital ethnography: The next wave in understanding the consumer experience. *Design Management Journal*. 2003, 14 (2): 75-81.
- [13] L. Irons. *Ethnography and Ubiquitous Digital Research*. <http://skilfulminds.com/2010/02/04/ethnography-and-ubiquitous-digital-research/> (Accessed May 27, 2010).
- [14] P.M. Sunderland, and R.M. Denny. *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*. Left Coast Press, 2007.
- [15] P.M. Sunderland, and R.M. Denny. Psychology vs. Anthropology: Where is Culture in Marketplace Ethnography? in *Advertising Cultures*. Oxford Press, 2003.
- [16] T. Boellstorff. *Online Worlds: Convergence of the Real and the Virtual*. Springer, 2010.