RESEARCH NOTE

NETNOGRAPHIC TOURIST RESEARCH: THE INTERNET AS A VIRTUAL FIELDWORK SITE

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The Internet is emerging as a valuable fieldwork site for researching tourist experiences. This article argues that netnography, a web-based research technique developed by Robert Kozinets, could become more useful in tourism research as the Internet is increasingly normalized as part of everyday lifestyle. However, so far, in the field of tourism research, very few researchers have embraced netnographic techniques as alternatives or complements to traditional fieldwork methods such as face-to-face interviews and surveys. The article also considers the merits, opportunities, and challenges of netnographic tourism research, and provides suggestions for further study.

Key words: Netnography; Tourist experience; Tourism research methods

Introduction

The Internet is emerging as an important (virtual) fieldwork site for researching touristic experience. As such, various web-based research methods and terminologies have been developed, including netnography, webnography, virtual ethnography/cyber-ethnography, online surveys, and so on (Beaven & Laws, 2007; Dwivedi, 2009; Hine, 2000; Ismail, 2010; Janta & Ladkin, 2009; Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2006; Langer & Beckman, 2005; McLelland, 2002; Morgan, 2008; Williams, 2007; Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). However, only a few studies in tourism have deployed netnographic or other Internet-based research approaches (e.g., Dwivedi, 2009; Ismail, 2010; Janta & Ladkin, 2009; Woodside et al., 2007).

Two relevant trends are notable. First, a growing number of tourism consumers are joining online discussion sites to post messages pertaining to their travel experiences around the world. Secondly, the number of sites which are dedicated to travel experience message boards is rising. Examples of such sites include Tripadvisor.com, Igougo.com, and Virtualtourist.com. In addition, social networking sites, such as Travellerspoint, Passporstamp, WAYN, TravBuddy.com, CouchSurfing, and Exploroo, whose focus is travel, are rapidly

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growing in membership. For example, Tripadvisor had, as of August 24, 2011, according to its website, more than, "20 million members and over 50 millions reviews and opinions" on its forums.

Also, generic networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide means for members to form and join topic-specific groups and discussions. Examples of travel-related discussion threads/topics on Facebook (as of August 29, 2011) are "Hong Kong—A Complete Holiday Destination", "Leh—The Dream Destination For You," "Looking For Adventure Destinations in India?" and "Nepal Travel Information," created under "Adventure Travel Group Discussions." By searching such sites, enormous quantities of data pertaining to consumer experiences, perceptions, dilemmas, intention to travel, and so on, in relation to tourism around the world can be retrieved and analyzed. Some topics attract responses and debate from the general public, while others appeal to smaller segments of the cyber-community.

Netnography

Netnography is a research approach that was first proposed by Robert Kozinets within the framework of consumer research (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2006; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). It has in recent years been adapted to various research areas, although it remains in its infancy (Beaven & Laws, 2007; Dwivedi, 2009; Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2006; Langer & Beckman, 2005; Morgan, 2008; Woodside et al., 2007). At this stage, process, paradigmatic, ethical, and conceptual issues relating to netnography are still under debate. However, it appears certain that this methodology will become more important as the cyberspace continues to permeate everyday life. It is not far-fetched to envisage the Internet becoming virtually accessible to people in all parts of the world, and most day-to-day interactions, in workplaces and social environments, becoming predominantly web mediated, as they already are in many developed nations.

Netnographic research involves searching for and analyzing relevant computer-generated data to address identified research questions. For example, a researcher interested in travel motivations of tourists visiting New York can generate data using Internet search engines, such as Google, through strategic keyword searches. Researchers then use their discretion to include or exclude portions of generated data. Through iterative searches, working with different keyword permutations, the researcher can narrow down the data to meet desired research criteria. The data may be quantitative or qualitative, or both, as may be the methods of analysis. It is important, however, to be conscious of the merits and limitations of netnographic methods, and to find ways of managing them.

Merits and Challenges

The merits of netnographic research are many, and only the key ones will be highlighted. Data can be generated very expeditiously by searching for relevant text through search engines such as Google and Yahoo. Netnography also provides researchers with access to groups of people who may otherwise be difficult to reach. Further, the pseudonymous/anonymous nature of most online interactions can potentially generate more candid accounts compared to those created through the probing of a researcher. This point, however, needs to be qualified, as there is no basis for assuming that online interaction messages consist only of honest accounts from their authors. What is suggested here is that in online interactions participants might open up more, and on their own terms, in the absence of an inquisitive researcher.

However, netnographic research has its shortcomings. First, the researchers, as nonparticipant observers, cannot direct the content of participants' text. Secondly, the researcher cannot verify the authenticity of participants' claims (e.g., regarding their age and place of residence). As a result, researchers might inadvertently find themselves engaging with data contributed by child participants masquerading as adults, in studies that are age-range specific, for instance. Furthermore, netnographic researchers have no access to nonverbal communications, and have to rely entirely on written text, a condition that may limit the thickness of data. There are also legitimate concerns that some website content might be manipulated for various ends, as in the case, for example, where corporate-owned sites are administered in a manner that portrays a desired business image, so that negative

customer reviews, for instance, are deleted by website administrators. These limitations pose significant challenges for web-based research.

Ethical Issues

A key consideration is the ethical issues that arise when research is conducted online (Beaven & Laws, 2007; Dwivedi, 2009; Ismail, 2010; Janta & Ladkin, 2009; Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2006; Langer & Beckman, 2005; Morgan, 2008; Woodside et al., 2007). Key among these is the informed consent dilemma. However, most authors agree that where data are collected from pseudonymous/anonymous public-type forums, with the researcher acting as nonparticipant observer, the requirement for informed consent of individual participants falls away, although researchers might still need to negotiate access from gatekeepers (e.g., website administrators).

However, in the case of private membership forums, researchers might need to disclose their intentions before participating in the online exchanges. It would be unfair and perhaps even fraudulent under these conditions for researchers to mask their identities and proceed to solicit information from unsuspecting online group members. In relation to sensitive topics, however, revealing researcher identity might compromise the quality of the data, as the observer effect begins to operate.

Future Research

Netnographic research methods offer a contemporary alternative and triangulating complement to traditional qualitative and quantitative tourism research techniques, such as face-to-face interviews and surveys. It is envisaged that in tourism research, more researchers will adopt Internet-based fieldwork as the volume and traffic of online postings relating to tourism experiences around the world continue to grow. However, specific adaptations of netnography for tourism research have yet to be considered in detail. This could be an important step for tourism researchers and consultants who want to embrace the Internet as an expanding fieldwork site going into the next century.

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