REVISITING THE NETNOGRAPHY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL MARKETING RESEARCH CONCERNING CONTROVERSIAL AND/OR SENSITIVE ISSUES

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INTRODUCTION

In doing primary data collection, social marketers must ask people questions about topics such as smoking, sickness, sex, and charity- topics that touch people's deepest fears, anxieties, and values. While people are generally willing to be interviewed about these topics, they are more likely to give inaccurate, self-serving, or socially desirable answers to such questions than to questions about cake mixes, soft drinks, or cereals. (Bloom and Novelli 1981, p.80)

Netnography is an online ethnographic research method (Kozinets 2002) that is considered to be relevant and useful in analyzing individuals, groups, and communities where access based on conventional methods is difficult (Pires et al. 2003). Since this difficulty in access is mainly the case for social marketing research concerning controversial and/or sensitive issues (Bloom and Novelli 1981), the purpose of this conceptual paper is to argue that netnography can be considerably effective, useful, relevant, and fruitful method in conducting social marketing research concerning controversial and/or sensitive issues. Thus, not only can it reduce the research problems social marketing researchers largely encounter by allowing them to access to the informants, collect rich, thick, and reliable data, gain profound consumer insights, and study processes and patterns of behavior unobtrusively, but it can also provide researchers an opportunity to see whether the existing and well accepted guidelines of netnography as a method itself ought to be challenged, revised, and repositioned.

Background

Over the course of two or three decades, the usage of the Internet is rapidly growing with the technological changes and advancements. A growing number of consumers are frequently using the Internet for various reasons in their everyday lives as they also form online communities and social groups in an attempt to share their attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and behaviors as well as discuss various issues ranging from controversial, sensitive, and socio-political issues to the issues with regard to lifestyles, products, services, brands, and consumption patterns (Kozinets 2002). Along with the widespread usage of the internet, netnography, as an online research method, has started to draw significant attention among researchers (see Beaven and Laws 2007; Kozinets 1998, 2001, 2002; Nelson and Otnes 2005; Sandlin 2007; Schau and Gilly 2003).

For marketing and consumer researchers, ethnographic research method is considered to be a vital means of gaining rich, thick, and various data about consumers (Geertz 1973; Goulding 2003), mainly because these consumers are observed in their natural settings in which they practice their everyday lives (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Netnography is an online research method refers to the adaptation of the guidelines of traditional ethnography to the study of online communities in an attempt to gain rich and thick insights, and thus provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under the investigation (Kozinets 2002). Nevertheless, these online communities and social groups "have a real existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior" (Kozinets 1998, p.366). Therefore, netnography can well be applied for investigating the discourses of online consumers, communities, and social groups concerning their needs, wants, desires, feelings, attitudes, ideas, opinions, tastes, lifestyles, and experiences in an attempt to gain profound consumer insights (Abbott 2001; Fischer et al. 1995). Besides, netnography is claimed to be "faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interview" (Kozinets 2002, p.61). Netnography research method has, thus far, been employed and recruited by various researchers in much studies, which are largely falling under the category of marketing and consumer research, including online coffee communities (Kozinets 2002), cross-cultural wedding (Nelson and Otnes 2005), consumer education (Sandlin 2007), Star Trek fans (Kozinets 2001), loyal customers attitudes towards ticket distribution channels for live music events (Beaven and Laws 2007), and the like. To our knowledge, however, it has yet to be sufficiently employed and recruited by the researchers in an attempt to investigate relatively more controversial and/or sensitive issues (e.g., drug and alcohol addiction, sexual harassment, AIDS, racism, birth control, organ donation, condom usage, contraceptive usage, etc.), which mainly fall under the scope of social marketing research.

In simple terms, social marketing refers to "the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society" (Andreasen 1995, p.7). Along these lines, the main objective of social marketing is to maximize the quality of life for individuals and society as a whole (Kotler 1979). In an attempt to improve

personal and societal welfare, maximize quality of life, advance humanity, and thus illuminate "the darker corners of society" (Lee 1993, p.2), social marketing largely concerns with controversial and/or sensitive issues and takes aim at addressing the problems with regard to these issues (Andreasen 1995). However, compared to commercial marketing, the products are more complex, the demand is more heteregeneous, target groups and informants are more challenging to get access, consumer involvement is more intense, and the competition is more subtle in social marketing (Fadyen et al. 1999). Moreover, in line with the opening quote, Bloom and Novelli (1981, p.80) point out that social marketers "have less good, secondary data available about their consumers, they have more difficulty obtaining valid, reliable measures of salient variables, they have more difficulty sorting out the relative influence of identified determinants of consumer behavior and they have more difficulty getting consumer research studies funded, approved and completed in a timely fashion". Therefore, these distinctive features of social marketing make social marketing research concerning especially controversial and/or sensitive issues even more challenging (Goldberg 1995).

On the one hand, since social marketing takes aim at addressing mainly controversial and/or sensitive issues, researchers usually encounter problems in accessing and recruiting the informants and gathering confidential data (Bloom and Novelli 1981). Even if researchers can achieve access, informants may not be willing to reveal their actual identities and they hide their actual feelings, attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, expressions, opinions, behaviors, and experiences with regard to the controversial and/or sensitive issues under the investigation (Ayella 1993; Bloom and Novelli 1981; Langer and Beckman 2005). Therefore, in studying the controversial and/or sensitive issues of social marketing, employing merely conventional research methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups in the offline environment will not be sufficient in accessing to informants, gathering rich, thick, and confidential data, gaining profound insight, and understanding the phenomenon under the investigation. On the other hand, since online environment provides individuals, groups, and communities an opportunity to hide or cover up their actual identities, they can express and articulate their actual feelings, attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, expressions, opinions, behaviors, and experiences more truly, comfortably, and freely when discussing controversial and/or sensitive issues relying on the anonymity feature of online environments (Montoya-Weiss et al. 1998). Further, online research is less susceptible to response bias due to the less control of researchers over the conduct (Miller and Dickson 2001).

Consequently, since netnography is considered to be appropriate and relevant method for attempts to analyze individuals, groups, and communities where access based on conventional methods is difficult (Pires et al. 2003), this paper argues and proposes that netnography can be an effective, useful, relevant, and fruitful research method in studying controversial and/or sensitive issues that fall under the scope of social marketing research. Thus, not only can it reduce the research problems social marketing frequently encounters by allowing researchers to access to the informants, collect rich, thick, and reliable data, gain profound consumer insights, and study processes and patterns of behavior unobtrusively (Jorgensen 1989), but it can also provide researchers an opportunity to see whether the existing and well accepted guidelines of netnography as a method itself ought to be challenged, revised, and repositioned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In traditional ethnographic method, there exist guidelines established for researchers to follow at five stages such as gaining entrée into the culture or group under study, collecting and analyzing data, providing trustworthy interpretation, conducting ethical research, and member checking through getting participants' feedbacks (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Kozinets (2002) adapted these guidelines to the online context for the netnography method. Of these five adapted stages, however, this paper argues that the guidelines of the three stages need to be challenged, revised, and repositioned in accord with social marketing research context.

In the context of social marketing, the first stage that of the guidelines that need to be challenged, revised, and repositioned is the "entrée stage" of netnography. At this stage, Kozinets (2002) suggests that researcher should firstly identify the most suitable online communities relevant to the research question and then they should acquire as much possible detailed or descriptively rich data as possible. He divides online communities into five categories, namely bulletin boards, web rings, listservs, multiuser dungeons and chat rooms and claims that each of these categories has their own characteristic features in terms of providing information for a researcher. Kozinets (2002, p.63) states that "many marketing researchers will find the generally more focused and more information-laden content provided by the members of boards, rings, and lists to be more useful to their investigation than the more ocial information available in dungeons and chat rooms". However, although this guideline might be valid for commercial marketing researchers depending on the research question at hand, it might not be the case for social marketers who are studying more controversial and/or sensitive issues. Contrarily, since the other two online communities, namely multiuser dungeons and chat rooms, contain information that is mainly oriented toward social,

sexual, and relational issues, these communities can provide more relevant, suitable, and valuable insights into the more controversial and/or sensitive issues (Langer and Beckman 2005) social marketing researchers largely deal with.

The second stage that of the guidelines that need to be challenged, revised, and repositioned is the "data collection and analysis" stage of netnography. Since netnography draws on already transcripted data and documents, it has an advantage over the other qualitative methods which has to deal with the transcription process of data. In the data collection and analysis stage of netnography, Kozinets (2002) divides online communities into four categories, namely tourists, minglers, devotees, and insiders. Among these four types of online communities, he claims tourists - who lack strong social ties and deep interest in the activity - and minglers - who have strong social ties but minimal interest in the consumption activity - represent data source not as important as devotees and insiders for researchers. In line with this notion, Kozinets (2002, p.64) goes on and states that "for marketing research that is useful for marketing strategy formulation, the devotees- who have strong consumption interests but few attachments to the online group- and the insiders- who have strong ties to the online group and to the consumption activity and tend to be long-standing and frequently referenced members- represent the most important data sources". However, although this guideline might be relevant again for commercial marketing researchers depending on the research question at hand, it might not be relevant for social marketing researchers due to the fact that tourists and minglers can also represent an important data source as they express and articulate their feelings, thoughts, and experiences more freely and comfortably without having inhibitions that strong ties and attachments to others and/or the activity itself can generate. Solomon (1996, p.11) claims that "from behind their screen identities, respondents are more apt to talk freely about issues that could create inhibitions in a traditional face-to-face group, particularly when discussing sensitive topics". When discussing controversial and/or sensitive issues, however, not only traditional face-to-face groups but also online strong ties and attachments to others and/or the activity itself can create some inhibitions and biases for and among respondents. Therefore, contrary to the existing guideline with regard to the data collection and analysis stage of netnography in which devotees and insiders positions are prioritized, this paper argues that, compared to devotees and insiders, tourists and minglers can represent more significant data sources and provide more relevant, suitable, and valuable insights for the controversial and/or sensitive issues (Langer and Beckman 2005) social marketing researchers largely deal with.

The third stage that of the guidelines that need to be challenged, revised, and repositioned is the "research ethic" stage of netnography. One of the most controversial and critical issues in netnography and online research in general is the ethical implications. On the one hand, there is no any consensus on the ethical implications of netnography and online research in general among qualitative researchers. On the other hand, discussions largely revolve around the issue of whether the online data are public declarations that offer no any ethical review, and thus anybody can participate in the communication without any restrictions or private domains that offer an ethical review for an analysis, and thus access is restricted and reserved for members only. In other words, while some researchers consider online data as public declaration, and therefore advocate an analysis without the necessity of ethical review, other researchers consider online data private and confidential, and therefore advocate the analysis with an informed consent and disclosure of the researchers (Haggerty 2004). Waskul and Douglas (1996) claim that, however, online interactions are both public and private where the distinctions between the two are getting blurred due to the fact that although the Internet is a publicly accessible phenomenon, just because users engage in online interaction from their own homes, they may assume and perceive it as private and confidential. Therefore, they posit that online researchers must distinguish between what is publicly accessible and what can be publicly disseminated. Along these lines, some researchers claim that rigorous ethical standards and guidelines should be applied to an analysis, whether it is public declaration or private communication, in an attempt to avoid giving damage to the medium (Kozinets 2002). In line with this notion, Kozinets (2002, p.65) recommends four ethical research procedures for marketing researchers using netnography such as "(1) The researcher should fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research; (2) the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity of informants; (3) the researchers should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched; and (4) the researcher should take a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue. This procedure requires the researcher to contact community members and to obtain their permission (inform consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research". However, these rigorous procedures and guidelines in netnography may not be suitable for the controversial and/or sensitive issues of social marketing for two main reasons. First of all, these procedures and guidelines may harm the unobtrusiveness feature of netnography which is considered to be crucial for studies dealing with controversial and/or sensitive issues. Secondly, not only the disclosure of researcher's presence and intervention may ruin the synergy of the community and scare away the participants (Catterall and Maclaran 2001) but also may jeopardize the future and the success of the research under investigation due to the fact that individuals, groups, and/or communities, who comfortably and freely engage in online discussions, may disengage their participation or presence if they have an antagonistic approach towards research, researcher, or any external interventions (Langer and Beckman 2005). Therefore, since some of the established rigorous ethical guidelines and procedures are found to be incompatible with the aim of social

marketing research concerning controversial and/or sensitive issues, it is argued that social marketing research need to espouse a more flexible, pragmatic and utilitarian approach of ethic in establishing new ethical guidelines of netnography specifically for studying social marketing research that takes aim at improving personal and societal welfare and advancing humanity. This new approach of ethic, echoing Lee (1993), needs to espouse studies in which researchers do not have to disclose their presence and/or the availability of the research as well as keep its unobtrusive characteristic feature while also acknowledging the need to protect the rights of participants and the obligation not to harm them.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper argues that netnography is an appropriate, relevant, and useful method in conducting social marketing research concerning controversial and/or sensitive issues. Since accessing to informants and gathering rich and reliable data are difficult processes through employing conventional methods in such contexts, netnography, as a relatively new online research method, is claimed to provide vital opportunities for social marketing researchers in reducing these aforementioned research problems they frequently encounter. This paper also argues that some of the existing guidelines of netnography need to be challenged, revised, and repositioned specifically for social marketing research concerning controversial and/or sensitive issues. The recommendation for future research would be to employ the revised version of netnography method in empirically investigating any of the controversial and/or sensitive social marketing research phenomena.

REFERENCES

References Available Upon Request