Editorial

Netnography: A Method to Study Health Cultures and Communities Online

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The Internet is now an imperative context for health research with many health educators using online communities such as newsgroups, blogs, forums, social media networking sites, podcasting, video casting, photo sharing communities, and virtual worlds. Health education research is a highly tailored process designed specifically for individual issues. Health educators use research to gather information about health awareness, health attitudes, and health behavior in particular.

Netnography is a branch of ethnography first developed by Robert Kozinets in 1998 [1]. This term is a combination of two separate words *Net* and *Ethnography*. In order to understand Netnography, explanation of Ethnography is needed. Ethnography is an exploration of a cultural phenomenon. The classic ethnography is a general study and analysis of the territory, the climate, and the habitat. It should make a contribution towards perception of the social human life. Ethnography observes the world from the point of view of the subject not the ethnographer. It provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups.

Motion pictures, sports, music, automobiles, fast foods, toys, consumer electronics, computers and peripherals, software, cigarettes, beer, coffee and many other products and services are discussed in online communities whose importance is being recognized by fashionable sellers increasingly [1, 2].

To answer the question "Why do we use Netnography?" it is enough to point out its increasing importance such that about 39,149,103 Iranian Internet users in 2016 were active in online communities [3]. Definitely, the virtual settings are more numerous, and even though they are called «virtual», they have a real impact on all individuals. Virtual

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comminutes are recognized as an information source for individuals that influence their behaviors. Communities are everywhere, and exist for every possible taste. Therefore, it opens opportunities for health educator researchers to study the needs and perceptions of individuals who interact online. Individuals, for making lifestyle and health product choices, often turn to the Internet for information on which to base their decisions. In other words, individuals are using virtual communities to contact fellow people who are seen as objective information sources. Netnography allows researchers to keep record of these interactions, quantify changes over time, and perform insightful analysis.

So concretely, how does Netnography works? Netnography follows six overlying phases: Research planning, Entrée, Data collection, Interpretation, Ensuring ethical standards, and Research representation. With the relevant online communities identified, the researchers must immerge themselves into the communities to get a better understanding. This includes regularly reviewing discussions, maintaining a thorough record of all postings, recording observations on the evolving nature of the discussion, and identifying themes within the conversations with respect to content, context, and type of interactions. Once they have entered the communities and know better about the behaviors, they can start collecting data. There are three types of data as *Archive*, which are generated without the researcher involvement, the researcher just has to go through the existing conversations: *Elicited* that will be co-created by the researcher and the members. The researcher introduces himself in the community and asks one direct question to the members; and *Field notes* via observational and reflective notes. At this point, the importance of the problem definition is highlighted. It should guide the researcher in defining the important and relevant data. Data collection should continue as long as new insight comes up. Data analysis, similar to other qualitative research methods, is tailored in three main steps as constructing the classification system: coding, synthesis and contextualization. Ethical issues in Netnography should answer several fallowing concerns: Are online forums private or public sites? What constitutes "informed consent" in the Internet?, and fully disclose your identity, Ensure anonymity of members, incorporate feedback, and Obtain permission before publishing [4].

Like other methodological researches, Netnography has not been yet analyzed from two positive and negative sides. For health educator researchers, Netnography causes individuals participating in online communities often share in-depth insight on themselves, their lifestyles, and the reasons behind the choices

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they make as consumers. In other words, individuals may be more open online than in real life. In addition, Internet provides have access to a broader cohort of respondents, enjoy greater continuity in research, and perform cheaper and faster than offline research to obtain data. Moreover, Netnography helps health educators to improve their interventional programs and assists them in developing effective health interventional strategies. Nonetheless, there are several known disadvantages for Netnography, which are classified as difficult to extrapolate results to the general population, focused on textual data, underdeveloped toolkit for data gathering and analyses, instability of the user base, and ethical issues of using information [4].

However, the information provided in the Netnography about health education issues (relating it to individual awareness, attitudes, beliefs and any related factors to objective life style) might be useful in explaining a range of interventional strategies with wider applications.

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