

Gigi Taylor Book Review Netnography by Robert Kozinets

A former professor of mine said that one should read a journal article or even a book by first reading the references. Then one should read the author's biography. After these foundational elements are read, one can then begin to read the piece with a clear understanding of the author's point of view.

I began reading *Netnography* by Robert Kozinets with all the earnestness of diligent grad student. I first turned to the references. Most the articles were from business, communication or technology related journals. I then looked for information on the author. Sage, a respected publisher of scholarly books did not provide professional profile of the Kozinets, oddly.

As an anthropology grad student, I have taken several courses on the theory and method of ethnography, a qualitative method of observation first developed by anthropologists. Ethnography is the study of human culture. Like journalism, the magic of ethnography comes from both observing and writing.

As an applied consumer researcher, I have conducted many ethnographies for business clients. I learned the ethnographic method by working side-by-side trained PhD level anthropologists. I selected *Netnography* as a book to review because it is a well-known book within the qualitative research community, yet given my background, I was leery to read a book that introduced a new, update version of a classic method.

Who is Robert Kozinets, the author of *Netnography*? A couple of pages from the end of the book, Kozinets writes, "We, this group, this community of wired anthropologists, have the ability to trace cultural interactions wherever it is manifested." With a couple of very specific keywords I was able to find Kozinets' vita. All three of Dr. Kozinets' degrees (BA, MBA and PhD) are in business. His academic appointments have all been in business schools. All of his editorial board appointments are for business journals. Kozinets is using a very liberal definition of 'anthropologist.'

Netnography is essential a basic "how to" book that provides a step-by step guide to conducting ethnographies within online communities like bulletin boards, social media sites and other social digital spaces. According to Kozinets' very clear and unequivocal guidelines, there are 5 steps to netnography: Step 1 - Definition of research question. Step 2 - Identification of online community. Step 3-Community participation and observation. Step 4 - Data analysis and interpretation. Step 5 - Write, present and report.

Would I recommend this book to others? Yes.

I would recommend *Netnography* to a professional colleague who is interested in writing a client proposal for an online ethnography. This is also a good first book for an academic colleague who wants to learn more about the extension of ethnography to online communities. As a college instructor, I would use *Netnography* in an undergraduate research methods course. For all of these audiences, Kozinets' language is approachable, engaging, lively and useful (Vasquez and Onal 2012).

However, my recommendation would come with the following list of caveats that my reader should understand as the firm hand of Robert Kozinets directs their exploration of online ethnography.

First of all know that a marketing scholar, not an anthropologist wrote this book on online ethnography. The business background explains the odd treatment of the history of ethnography. An anthropologist would never use the phrase "manners and customs of the savages" (page 5) to explain the early origins of ethnography given the troubled origins of anthropology. Simply put, Kozinets writes without context and history of anthropology.

Also, know that the book is written in an approachable way, but there is an underlying tone of salesmanship, rather than scholarship. "Kozinets has been described as the 'Father of Netnography' and he is very protective of his creation. This leads to some parenting of readers: he is clear about the standards he expects us to live up to." (O'Donohoe 2010)

Next, know that this book introduces some thought provoking initial reflections on theories that would support the necessity for a new form of ethnography for online communities, but the reflections are brief and fleeting. For example, Kozinets writes that "the key assertion here that the online social experiences are significantly different from face-to-face social experiences and the experience of ethnographically studying them is meaningfully different" (page 5). Kozinets casually writes that "the Internet has changed reality" (page 183). Use this book as a warm up, then look elsewhere for a more rigorous analysis of the implications of technology on society.

Finally, know that the netnographic method is a limited method. As presented by Kozinets, netnography is primarily for "online communities," not for "communities online." This means that netnography is limited to studying communities that ONLY exist online with limited interaction by members in face-to-face settings. A method that blends traditional ethnography and netnography would be the better method to study communities that exist in both off and online worlds. So, the book that discusses a more robust blended methodology from the point of view of anthropology has yet to be written.

References

Kozinets, Robert (2010). *Netnography*, Sage.

O'Donohoe, Stephanie (2010). *Book Review: Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Vol 29, Issue 2, p 328-330.

Vasquez, Camilla and Dery Onal (2012). *Book Review: Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, *The Modern Language Journal* 96