Mobile Ethnography: A New Research Method in Launching New Apps

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Extended Abstract

Research Question: Why is *Mobile Ethnography (ME)* important as a research method tool and what is its importance for future researchers and managers.

Method and Data:

- With millennials as highest users of mobile phones (90.3%) and the heaviest users and adopters of new apps, it is only natural to assume they are likely to be first ones to adopt the Vimi app.

- Recruiting students should not be mixed with students being a convenience sample as is perceived with most academic research in marketing.

- Since the goal of this study is to understand how college students use Vimi in practice, the researchers recruited 25 students from colleges throughout the U.S.

- All were pre-screened and fell into the category of medium/high mobile and social app usage.

- The participants used Vimi for a week and answered questions throughout the seven days on a mobile ethnography app called (OTS) that tracked their opinions as they completed assignments and explored Vimi's various organizational and chat tools.

- The students were told the specific dates that they would use the Vimi app and answer questions on the app during and after their app experience.

Why Mobile Ethnographic Research is A Superior Research Method: The main idea of ME is to leverage self-operated mobile technology to capture qualitative, in-the-moment feedback which is something that cannot be done through other methods such as focus groups and in-depth interviews.

ME is starting to gain tremendous popularity as individuals take their mobile phones everywhere they go and ME allows the researcher to be with the participant in real-time.

Modern researchers claim that people have become so comfortable with their cell phones, that asking them to snap a photo or quick video as they're walking around their homes or in a store is no big deal for the participants (Greenbook Directory Online). Not surprisingly then, this method of conducting research has met with tremendous success.

ME tools allow the researcher to capture rich in-the-moment insights via user-generated photos, videos, audio or texts so people can record in real-time their impressions as they're shopping or trying out a new product. Further, ME is convenient and a researcher has said: "Instead of having to go out with subjects, you have a constant live stream to their phone. It's a more appropriate way of doing ethnography rather than shadowing them over their shoulder, you're there with them but you're not tethered to them" (Nolan 2014). Since ME is between three and five times cheaper than traditional ethnography, it can be used more often and cover more markets (Burrows 2014).

ME is Important as Recall is Poor at a Later Point: It is well known from studies done on memory in psychology that people are not very accurate in recollecting past events and that memory can be easily influenced by suggestion *(Koriat and Bjork, (2005*). Koriat and Bjork (2005) mention this: "Everyone must have experienced this. You have an idea that is so great you think it's impossible you'll ever forget it. So, you don't bother writing it down. Within ten minutes you've forgotten it and it never comes back."

The above issue was confirmed by the following study: the researchers asked participants to learn pairs of words such as 'light-lamp' and were asked to estimate the likelihood that they would answer 'lamp' when later given the prompt 'light'. The subjects were over-confident and suggested a very high likelihood of answering the latter when prompted with the first word. However, when they got the word "light", they recalled the pair word as 'bulb' or 'shade' and the correct answer was not nearly as easily recalled as they had earlier predicted. The authors mention "foresight bias" in explaining this phenomenon of failure to elicit a correct recall at a later point in time.

By using a ME app, researchers can successfully circumvent lapses in memory by capturing observations in real-time. Since our objective was to see how potential users perceive the Vimi app and gather their feedback on their usage of the different features of the app, ME is the only research method which enables researchers to capture real-time app usage and experience.

Summary of Findings

This timely research makes conceptual and methodological contributions in a few ways. First, this paper highlights ME as a timely, cost-effective research method tool that allows the researcher to probe the participants for greater insights and get immediate results. Second, through an ME study, this paper demonstrates the steps and procedures that are followed in using ME in testing a new app. Third, the specific in-the-moment insights through comments and videos through ME offer results and reflection on launching a new app such as Vimi and collecting real-time data in a very unique way. Thus, by using ME, researchers can successfully circumvent lapses in memory by capturing observations in real-time.

Key Contributions

ME is an important and timely marketing research tool that captures specific in-the-moment insights through comments and videos and offers reflections on launching a new app such as Vimi in a very unique way. This research could provide the managers with the benefits of using ME as a research method tool that can generate rich data and insights hitherto unknown. Insights such as the positive reactions and the ease with which files could be organized and shared, organizational and filing utility as the main positioning of the app, constructive qualitative feedback on minor UX changes to make the app feel immediately familiar to users are unlikely to be obtained through a traditional research method. These insights not only help with improvising a product but also with insights on positioning the product.