

A Review of Qualitative Research Groups in Web 2.0 Social Networking Communities: Prepare to Be Amused, Inspired, and Even Blown Away

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The presence of qualitative research groups on Web 2.0 social networking applications, like Facebook, has continued to grow. These groups are self-organizing systems of people interested in particular aspects of qualitative research. Many of these qualitative research groups have companion internet websites and some also have companion YouTube channels, creating a very strong cyber presence. While visitors to these groups are encouraged to evaluate their quality for themselves, in general, the groups provide accessibility and good information for practitioners, students, and teachers of qualitative research alike. Most importantly, a number of these online qualitative research groups can serve as incubators for innovation for both the group members and visitors to the groups. Key Words: Facebook, Qualitative Research, Qualitative Research Groups, Web 2.0, and Social Networking

As I was browsing through some online community offerings for qualitative research intending to spend a little time in the qualitative cyber world, one of the first things I learned was that you had to know how to use the search engines for the particular social networking application you were visiting because if you didn't you would be endlessly surprised by your search results. As it turned out, and to my own surprise, I found myself going back to the qualitative research offerings on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>). As I did a little more investigating, I discovered that Facebook is the largest and fastest growing social networking site on the web, with 132 million unique visitors as of June, 2008. Its annual growth was a stunning 153% compared to another widely known social networking site MySpace with annual growth of only 3% (Techtree News Staff, 2008). No wonder I kept going back to Facebook! Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube are all examples of Web 2.0 applications. Web 2.0 applications are distinguished by their interactive features and opportunities for visitors to directly connect and interact with others online who might share common interests and activities.

Let's go back to what I learned about searching for qualitative research on Facebook. If you input the terms "qualitative research" in the search box on the top left side of the search page you will come up with, as of today's writing, 154 results. Of all the ways you can search for "qualitative research" on Facebook, this one is the least satisfying. You will come up with a hodgepodge of individuals whose connection to qualitative research, for the most part, you can't access because you're not their friend.

You'll also come up with a relatively small number of groups interested in some way or another in qualitative research. The better strategy is to click on one of the filters in the search engine after getting the initial results for your search terms.

If you click on "groups" after hitting the search button for the terms "qualitative research" you will come up with 125 groups. If you click on "events," you will come up with one lone event, and if you click on "web," you will hit the jackpot with 500 websites devoted to qualitative research. Again, these numbers are all of today's writing, or more precisely, this moment's writing. Life and community in cyberspace move quite rapidly. The 500 websites are certainly a resource worth checking out at some point, but I wanted to zero in on the online groups related to qualitative research and see what was happening there.

What I found was an interesting potpourri of qualitative research groups, some designed for marketing and advertising professionals who utilize qualitative research in their jobs, some designed by students for their qualitative research courses or to solicit participants for their research studies, some, like InSites Consulting Group in Ghent, Belgium, where, after exploring their website (<http://www.insites.eu/>), I immediately wanted to go and work there, and some that were just plain strange. Navigating the qualitative research groups efficiently has some rules attaching to the process, just as searching for the groups in the first place does.. There are basically two types of groups; namely, an open group that anyone can join and invite others to join or a closed group to which you must be invited to join by either a member or the group's administrator. I'm open access inclined so I liked the open groups better. For some of the closed groups I developed nagging questions about why they were closed and what they were doing—an interesting, if trivial, research question in itself.

I thought it might be both useful and fun to highlight a few of the qualitative research groups on Facebook. As I was visiting these groups and trying to learn what they were all about and what they might be able to offer practitioners, academics, and students of qualitative research, I started paying attention to why I kept going back to certain groups and bypassing others. I concluded that there was something about the level of energy and originality of the groups that caught my attention—their narratives about the group—their content—their overall presentations—and their add-ons like color and graphics—some of the very same elements that make the difference between a "knock your socks off" qualitative report and a "can I go to sleep now" one. The sample below of qualitative research groups from Facebook includes some of the qualitative groups that caught my attention and attracted me more than some of the others.

Ethnosnacker Group

Ethnosnacker is an open group with a small membership of 15 people. It identifies itself as a business group focusing on marketing and advertising. Its own description from the group page describes itself as "A group dedicated to commercial ethnographic research, its practitioners, clients and subjects. Ethnosnacker will explore emerging and conventional tools and methodologies to transparently share successes and failures." They add a rationale for joining which goes like this "Join to, among other things, participate in debates, view films and find out what everyone else is doing with the fastest growing technique in qualitative research." This is an interesting group because it uses

multiple formats to brand itself and to communicate its mission. Ethnosnacker has its group presence on Facebook, its own Ethnosnacker YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/ethnosnacker>), and its off the charts quality website Everyday Lives (<http://www.everydaylives.com>).

On its YouTube channel, Ethnosnacker uploads various short films designed to help ethnographers look at what works and what doesn't in using field techniques to help understand consumer behavior. Siamack Salari, the group's founder, is also very interested in soliciting feedback from other qualitative researchers around the world. Some of the videos are focused on how to develop a film template when working multi-country sites, discussing the issue of quality in ethnographic research, analyzing a video of a stand-up comedian who demonstrates, for Salari, the oblique way of looking at everyday life that is essential for doing good ethnography, and the rarest of the rare, sharing failures.

Ethnosnacker's companion website "Everyday Lives" has this key theme running through it "the only way to understand is 'to watch people in the wild.'" As a result, there's a big emphasis on field observation and on videography. This article is taking longer than it should because I'm having to resist the temptation to spend hours looking at this high quality website and think about all the cool things this group of worldwide ethnographers does to understand consumer behavior. Spend a little time visiting this website and watching videos on the Ethnosnacker YouTube channel and ideas for teaching and practicing qualitative research will be flowing, if not overflowing, and you will soon be in the zone. I wanted to taste more of Ethnosnacker so I went native and joined it. Now the group has 16 members. I told you, life moves fast in the cyber world.

Influence of Education on Spirituality (A Research Study) Group

This group with a whopping 187 members is the research platform for Tom Markle, a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. Try as I did, I couldn't figure out when the group was started. In the group description section, Tom simply posts his "Consent to Participate in Research" form letter. The first paragraph of his consent form describing his study states:

Dear reader,

This website is the home of a qualitative research study, being conducted by a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia, exploring what impact one's educational history has on one's spiritual and religious beliefs. The goal is to collect surveys from a wide variety of people using the power of the internet, so that the data collected in the study will be a fair assessment of what many people have experienced in both their educational and spiritual development. I encourage the participation of anyone interested, from devout religious believers to hardened atheists, and anyone in-between, to share information for this study. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

This is just the first paragraph of Tom's much longer consent form. The consent form is thorough and Tom covers privacy and consent issues that are unique to the use of the internet as a site of data collection. Readers who wish to participate are directed to the discussion section of the group where they will find a 32 item survey. Tom's site says that 17 surveys have been submitted so far. Eight of those were available to readers who visited the site. Since Tom provided participants with an option to submit their responses privately either through email or snail mail, I'm assuming that nine participants went that route. I spent time reading the longer narratives and short responses to the survey items of the eight participants who allowed themselves to be identified. I have to say I was impressed, and even moved, by the thoughtfulness and depth of many of the participants' answers. I'm cheering Tom on and wishing him every good fortune (and many respondents) in completing his doctoral studies. I'm hoping the same for one of Tom's respondent's, Sam, who said something about viewing eternity as the time it's been taking to finish his doctoral degree. This is an interesting and useful site for students and faculty alike who have not ventured into the cyber world to explore its possibilities as a site for qualitative research and who would like to see a real world example of an informed consent that addresses the unique privacy issues of the online world. I thought about participating in Tom's research project but decided not to. I must be feeling particularly grounded today because instead of trying to wrap my brain around spirituality and education, I went back to "Everyday Lives" and watched the video of the woman shaking a can in the grocery store instead.

The Real Research Liberation Front 2008 Group

This one is kind of just for fun, but the group and its companion website by the same name can be accessed at <http://www.researchliberationfront.com/index.html> as well as through its presence on Facebook. On the website, under the heading "RLF Credo," the group outlines its mission statement in much shorter and more understandable sentences than those I read by Herbert Marcuse (1964) when I was nineteen. Here is the Real Research Liberation Front's 2008 position statement:

We believe:

- That good researchers talk to everyone from drug dealers to housewives.
- In talking to people where they (not the researchers) feel comfortable.
- In measuring what people do rather than what they say they do.
- That man is a herd animal and not all herd members are equal.
- That waiting three months to find out the impact of your last campaign is so last year.

We are against:

- The belief that the numbers never lie.
- Asking silly questions of irrelevant witnesses.
- De-briefs where half the room fall asleep. Clients who say 'but we've always done it this way'.

- Cruel treatment of researchers at dinner parties when they tell you what they do for a living.
(<http://www.researchliberationfront.com/rlfcredo.asp>, ¶ 1-2)

It is clear to me that the group takes both its humor and its research seriously. The founding People's Commissar and Colonel General are both from London. The group has 54 members, many from the UK, but with representation from around the globe. The group has a photo album on Facebook and a lot of the speakers seemed to be talking in rooms with red walls, or at least pink ones (unless they were surfing).

For reasons that will become clear when you read the title of the group, I'm not going to pay much attention to the Qualitative Research Gives Me Gas Group. This group recruits members by stating that if they are extreme positivists this group is for them. The group has a highly respectful acknowledgment of the scientific contributions of qualitative researchers but doesn't like the gastrointestinal disturbances produced in positivists by reading qualitative research findings!

A Few Thoughts

The time I spent reviewing qualitative research groups on Facebook was enjoyable as was the time I spent writing up this review. I hope that my pleasure in the experience comes across loudly and clearly. I came away from the experience with some thoughts about qualitative research groups within social networking applications like Facebook and qualitative research in general. Obviously, the kind and quality of group varies dramatically, as does the size of its membership. The "caveat emptor" or "buyer beware" slogan of the real estate world comes to mind in the qualitative research group online world as well.

Qualitative research groups online are obviously connected to the people who created them and who participate in them. Most of the stakeholders have their pictures posted (or at least some picture). As a result, I couldn't find a group that had turned itself into a remote, decontextualized entity—and that includes the largest group, Qualitative Meaning, with over 800 members and a very active "wall" or discussion board with contributions from qualitative researchers or want-to-be qualitative researchers from all over the world. That these groups were connected to people whose names and pictures were visible made them seem as if they were operating on a very human scale and thus the groups appeared welcoming and inviting. The qualitative research group cyber world that I visited was a vibrant, participatory world.

With the "caveat emptor" principle in mind, the online qualitative research group world is brimming with interesting activities, good information, and healthy questioning of the tried and true ways of conducting qualitative research. In some groups, Ethnosnacker as a notable example, the level of openness and transparency about methods and results can take your breath away. Apart from the fact that visiting the online qualitative research group world is fun, I will return because I think these groups serve a very vital function as an incubator of new ideas for practitioners, students, teachers of qualitative research, and job hunters.

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