



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2023; 5(1): 113-115
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 24-02-2023
Accepted: 30-03-2023

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A case study of image construction of the WeChat educational group of SPSS training

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2023.v5.i1b.102>

Abstract

Based on the ethnographic research method, this study aims to construct the images of students and teaching assistants in the WeChat educational group of SPSS training, reveal core problems of this group, and make suggestions to address these problems. The findings are as follows. First, the students have the image of diligent learners and learners with mundane life, while the teaching assistants have the image of friendly helpers and utilitarian propagandists. Second, many problems such as homogeneous questions from students and inappropriate methods of publicity from teaching assistants influence interpersonal interaction in the group. Therefore, students and teaching assistants need to work together to change the situation. The study to some extent fills the research gap in the WeChat educational group of educational and training from the perspective of online ethnography, promoting the application of the theory of ethnography.

Keywords: Online ethnography, wechat educational group of SPSS training, image construction

1. Introduction

As information-based technologies develop rapidly, the scope of human activities is gradually extending from the real place to the virtual world. WeChat educational groups as the product of the Internet age have been the convenient platform for social interaction. People can communicate across time and space with freedom and messages can be transmitted over long distances at high speeds. Communication in WeChat educational groups can reflect people's images to some extent. The WeChat educational group of SPSS training, as a member of the group of education and training, is a good corpus for studying online ethnography because of its natural setting and its frequent interpersonal interaction. Hence, this study select the WeChat educational group of SPSS training as an object of study.

2. Literature Review

Online ethnography is to explore subcultures, values, behavioral patterns and meaning construction (Zheng & Xu 2016) ^[8] when people socially interact in online communities. Some scholars use different names for this research method due to their different focuses. For example, virtual ethnography (Hine 2000) ^[2], ethnography for Internet (Hine 2015) ^[3] and nethnography (Kozinets 2010) ^[4]. Some scholars dispute whether online ethnography belongs to a part of ethnography because the setting is virtual. Chinese scholars Guo Jianbin and Zhang Wei (2017) ^[7] consider that ethnography and online ethnography differs in their objects and specific operation strategies, but their nature is the same and they share the roughly same methodology.

In recent years, there are many domestic researches on online ethnography. Based on an 18-month online ethnography in multiple fandoms, associate professor Zhou Yijin (2021) ^[9] explains the existence of obvious idol loyalty and mobility constrains in Chinese celebrity fandoms. Wang Li and Li Li (2018) ^[6] elucidate the phenomenon of the stigmatization of network anchors from the angle of online ethnography. Besides, foreign researchers also pay much attention to this field. Gatson and Zweerink (2004) ^[1] utilize the ethnographic research method to study a community spawned from an Internet website devoted to a television serial and then interpret the relationship between ethnography and target objects. Laaksonen *et al.* (2017) ^[5] examine candidate-candidate online interaction during election campaigning from the perspective of online ethnography.

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However, education and training as a hot topic in society seems to be neglected by scholars in the field of ethnography. This study focuses on the WeChat educational group of SPSS training, trying to construct the images of students and teaching assistants in the WeChat educational group of SPSS training, reveal core problems of this group, and then make suggestions to address these problems.

3. Methodology

The study takes the WeChat educational group of SPSS training as an example. Since its inception on 27 November 2021, the researcher has been staying in the group, where the number of people reached 256 on 29 November and has remained stable at over 250 in a month. People can only be invited into it by administrators, so members of the group are mainly students and teaching assistants without many other groups such as advertisers and liars. As this group is created to learn how to operate SPSS and the course is advertised as being suitable for researchers who are desperate to apply the SPSS software to researchers, the distribution of students' occupations is relatively concentrated.

Based on a month of observation since 29 November, this study focuses on two groups including students and teaching assistants in order to delve into the following problems: (1) What kinds of images do students and teaching assistants respectively have in the WeChat educational group of SPSS training? (2) What sorts of problems do the WeChat educational group of SPSS training have and how to effectively solve them?

4. Image Construction of Students

4.1 Diligent Learners

One of the most common information in the WeChat educational group of SPSS training is some questions about the operation of the SPSS software. The distribution of the timing of questions asked by students is between the evening of the day when the course ends and the morning of the following day. Besides, the number of questions from different individuals remains high during one month, although there exist part of students who always ask numerous questions. These phenomena indicate that students have a strong willingness to study and they can persist in learning relevant technical knowledge. In terms of the content of the questions, most of the students mainly focus on difficult points of the lesson, while few of them pay attention to operations repeatedly emphasized by the teacher, which reflects that the majority of students grasp the key points in time and do some technical exploration outside class so that they can master SPSS as soon as possible.

The image of studious learners is reflected not only in their daily questions on the software but also in their frequent suggestions on the course. There are 52 suggestions from 33 students in the WeChat educational group in a month with the change of the content of suggestions over time. In the first week, suggestions are chiefly about teaching methods and the way that teaching assistants answer questions. Some participants deem that the speed of teaching new knowledge is too fast and should slow down. Some consider that the course should center around actual operation rather than include too much theoretical knowledge. Others think that text-based replies are vague and they should be supplemented with more guidance in the form of audio or

short videos. At the middle and late stages, the distribution of categories of advice become scattered and it is difficult to classify them into a specific range, which manifests that the students have gradually adapted to the teaching style and that suggestions have progressively shifted towards individual learning requirements.

4.2 Learners with Mundane Life

Although the administrators of the WeChat educational group have repeatedly stressed that information unrelated to SPSS learning is forbidden to be posted, there still exist particular participants who send messages about the topic of life. However, these messages are often not presented abruptly but are extended topics based on the foregoing context. Once, after a discussion on poisson distribution, students asked when poisson distribution could be used. As the teacher answered the question carefully, the student still felt perplexed and then made a comment that "it's so hard to be a postgraduate of liberal arts". This remark resonated with 17 students, who started to share their hardships during the postgraduate stage and finally even talked about the difficulties of finding a job after graduation. On another occasion, in the process of solving the problem, a student suddenly did not respond to the teaching assistant for a long time. Hence, the teaching assistant called the student in the group out of duty. Afterwards, the student replied, "Sorry, I was just teaching my child a math problem and forgot to reply". Someone in the group quickly responded "My kid is always confused about math problems either". After that, six participants sent messages about annoying things from their children 11 times. Situations as above occur 7 times in the group, with a total of 29 participants taking part in these discussions, which means the WeChat educational group of SPSS training cannot get rid of the atmosphere of our daily life.

5. Image Construction of Teaching Assistants

5.1 Friendly Helpers

The duty of teaching assistants is to assist students to solve their problems so that they can master the software. In this group, teaching assistants achieve their goals in three main ways. Firstly, they create a sense of ritual for the lesson by reminding students two hours in advance each day that the lesson is about to start. The benefit of the timed reminders is not only to remind students who are likely to forget to attend class, but also to make students raise the awareness of preparation ahead of time. Secondly, the teaching assistants ask students if they have any questions within an hour after the end of each day's lesson, which is advantageous to developing a good habit of timely revision. The round-the-clock question and answer session also helps students to further improve their operational skills of SPSS. Thirdly, the teaching assistants regularly send papers covering different areas such as economics, sociology and linguistics to the WeChat educational group after class, encouraging students to understand the application of SPSS in practice through reading. This action is helpful for students to expand their academic horizons to a large extent. On the whole, the workflow is relatively rigorous and the teaching assistants are competent.

5.2 Utilitarian Propagandists

In addition to answering questions, publicity in the WeChat educational group has become one of the main tasks of

teaching assistants. On the one hand, it is crucial to advertise the SPSS course. Before it is run, teaching assistants give a detailed description of work experiences and relevant honors of the main teacher in order to highlight that the enterprise indeed engages qualified teachers, which not only reduces the number of dropouts during the course but also creates a good image of the company and lays the foundation for the promotion of other courses later on. After the initial publicity, the teaching assistants insist on relaying the latest news of the SPSS lesson, thus attaining the aim of making the course keep popular. Besides, the teaching assistants frequently send messages about new courses to the WeChat educational group, in which they endeavour to market these courses. The content of messages and WeChat pushes is not only lively and interesting but highly focused so as to stimulate the purchase desire of the group as far as possible. A new course is often advertised three or more times so that the number of participants will increase with the expectant surge of public recognition. However, no matter how the form changes, the ultimate purpose of publicities from teaching assistants is to make the business profitable and ensure their own performance-related pay.

6. Discussion

Some students do not pay attention to the questions asked by others so similar questions are often put forward repeatedly, which leads to two consequences that the workload for teaching assistants remarkably increases and the identification of important information in the group becomes harder for students. In order to address this problem, students should first know whether similar questions have been asked before. If not, then state what makes you feel confused. In addition, the teaching assistants can systematically collect the daily questions and answers into a Word document and send it to the WeChat educational group, then reminding the students to receive it. This action is not only effective in cope with homogenous problems but helpful for students to find something that they have not thought about before.

There are some problems with the way that publicity is conducted. The publicity of new courses in the WeChat educational group lacks relevance for actual requirements of students' daily lives and research directions. Besides, too many WeChat pushes overwhelm the group, which results in many complaints from students. In order to dispose of these problems, teaching assistants design a questionnaire with explicit questions concerning students' needs so that commonalities can be found by analyzing the findings and then accurate WeChat pushes can come to fruition.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, the WeChat educational group of SPSS training with students and teaching assistants as the main members vividly embodies different images. The students have the image of diligent learners and learners with mundane life, while the teaching assistants have the image of friendly helpers and utilitarian propagandists. Although both sides endeavor to make the group better, there is no denying that some problems such as homogeneous questions from students and inappropriate methods of publicity from teaching assistants impact interpersonal interaction. If members in the group pay more attention to others' opinions and attempt to solve problems for others, the atmosphere will become more friendly. However, although there are

many valuable findings in this study, limitations still exist that problems in the WeChat educational group of SPSS training may not exist in all groups of education and training. In future, more similar WeChat educational groups can be selected for study, from which common problems can be better summarized.

8. Acknowledgments

This study is sponsored by the Practice and Innovation Funds for Graduate Student of Northwestern Polytechnical University (PF2023131). There is no conflict of interest in this paper.

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