ESSAY 3 PHASE 2
Student 2 ● Prof. Mani ● Fall 2020

Introduction

R/campingandhiking is an online community on the website Reddit.com. The community has a focus on discussing outdoor topics, questions related to the same topic, and sharing experiences. Many users on the subreddit post pictures of views from places they have been, and these are one of the most popular types of post. The community is very centric to the goals of sharing experience and knowledge about subjects like camping, hiking, and other outdoor activities. There is a clear hierarchy in the community based on experience, and knowledge related to the topic of the subreddit. People who know a lot about the community subject or have been involved for a long time are respected in the subreddit.

Based on observations made while studying the community, aspects of the person that are not relevant to the subject of the subreddit are not important, and any identification of the self made during a community interaction has a relevance to the discussion. What this means is users do not identify factors about themselves when they are not relevant to the conversation. These factors of the person include gender, race, creed, and social status. When one of these is mentioned it means that it is important to the discussion in some way, even if the reason cannot be seen at face value. In the threads examined, this trend becomes apparent on a few notable occasions.

Methods

To perform this ethnography, all primary research was done observing the community. Over the course of three months, I have observed the community r/campingandhiking to draw conclusions about how it operates. My ethnographic observations were made over the course of one week, and the field notes were done over 3 weeks; the first week observation, the second week analysis, and the third week any trends that arose. I observed the three threads over the course of a few hours, to try to ascertain any motives, or nuances in them. At no point did I make my presence known to the participants or contribute in any way to the threads. Being that I was there as a clandestine observer, the interaction in each thread was unadulterated and genuine in theory, given no external factors.

Because of this the observation methods were ethical and changed no interaction. All three threads were inactive by the time of observation.

Results

The results of the collective observation of the three threads are displayed below. There is no attempt made to analyze yet, and these are just observations and notes. No secondary research is included in the below results.

The user in the first thread examined is a self-identified woman from the Pacific Northwest, who has experience camping, and is 40 years old. She is looking for a place to have an outing not far from Northwest Washington. She prefers to be in a place away from large numbers of people. She owns a tent, and a car, but she prefers to "glamp" and stay in a small cabin if possible because she is going alone. Glamping being a term to describe a situation like camping, where one is staying in the woods, but having added amenities. Four users answer her thread. u/bob_lala suggests going to either Oregon or Washington which have many campgrounds and opportunities for Glamping. The second user recommends going to Washington where one can rent cabins and "yurts". A yurt essentially being a dome shaped large tent. The second responder adds links to booking a yurt or cabin and instructs the user to book one soon because they are popular, and availability runs out fast. The third response suggests renting a cabin at Kalaloch, Sol Duc hot springs. The final response is very short and suggests Ruby beach.

u/Z010011010 makes no identification of their gender, race, or age. They make a post concerned that too many people are going unprepared into the wilderness and the poster is worried that this could be a fatal mistake. He does identify himself as an amateur because he says that he is not an expert guide. He also makes it clear that he is not trying to "gatekeep". A gatekeeper being someone who judges a person's status in the community. This term is used to identify a toxic person in the community. His main question is how to let people know they are underprepared without being rude or condescending. The top comment instructs the user that most of the people who are underprepared come out safe, and if the user really wants to help, they can bring extra water to give to passersby. The next comment says that they believe the original poster is being too nitpicky, and that

these people will be just fine. The third commenter adds that it may be a good idea to let underprepared people know what the poster carries so they get an idea that they may be lacking. The next commenter u/woodbarber volunteers for SAR which stands for search and rescue, an organization that finds lost people in the outdoors. This user adds to the discussion by saying they would never tell anyone to leave the trail, but they also compare gear to give them an idea that they are underprepared. All three of these users had verbally emphasized the user's need to be polite to those he interacts with.

The final thread is a gear discussion thread about what to keep in a car at the trailhead. Gear posts like these are popular with the users, who use it as an opportunity to give advice, and to show off their experience and knowledge. The original poster does not identify anything about themselves not directly relevant to the post. The post is a list of the users' typical list of items they leave in the car while on hikes and while camping. The user also asks other users what they leave in their cars to get an idea of what he could add. The first suggestion is a change of clothes and a way to clean eyeglasses. Several users recommend leaving information in the car for rangers to find the user should they become lost, and detailed descriptions of where they will be. One user from Canada does not identify their gender but mentions that they do have a wife. This user suggests leaving a cooler with drinks of choice and ice in it for a reward at the end of the trail. Everyone on the thread remains gender neutral, and few users identify anything about themselves not related to the subreddit. All posts try to contribute to what the original poster is asking.

Analysis

The user in the first thread identifies herself by gender and location, this is one of the few times this is done. Gender does not appear to be important on the subreddit and has no relevance to the community goals. She makes it clear that she prefers to glamp. This is because glamping is safer than being in a tent, and a cabin offers more security. She wants to glamp because of her alone status she says. This can be interpreted several ways, the first being that she can afford more luxury due to lack of people in her party. The second would be that she feels vulnerable

because she is alone. The other users seemed to respect this and gave the original poster all the information she wanted. This is not because she was a woman, and they sought some kind of clout by helping a "damsel in distress". Users in the community would be willing to help anyone out, because of the community value of spreading experience and knowledge about the subreddits topics. However, because she needed specific advice on what to do, and why she felt like she had to do it, the user was forced to identify herself. Her identification by location would help the other users find her a place. Her gender identification was not necessary by face value, but there could be reasons behind it, which can't be definitely speculated on.

u/Z010011010 makes no identification of their gender, race, or age. This user posted the second thread in the notes. They are a self-proclaimed amateur, because they said they are not professional. The user is concerned that they are gatekeeping. Whether they are subconsciously judging or not is almost impossible to tell. One of the commenters u/woodbarber volunteers for SAR which stands for search and rescue. This user immediately gets noticeable respect from the previous commenter and the original poster for their occupation. With an emphasis on skills and experience it would make sense that being a member of search and rescue would put someone high on a scale of hierarchy. Unlike the original poster, this user is a professional. u/woodbarber identifies themselves because they have relevant say in the thread. Being that they are a member of the hierarchy, their opinion would theoretically get more respect, and in the thread it does. The identification the user makes is akin to an EMT showing their badge at an accident scene to go get involved with helping.

In the third thread, the original poster makes no effort to identify themselves in any way, and only divulges information related to their post. The subreddit is very neutral in respect to all attributes of a person not related directly to the subject of the subreddit. Few if any users on the subreddit r/campingandhiking will treat anyone's questions differently based on class, race, creed or gender. Any bias on the subreddit comes from aspects of the person disjoint from those attributes. Judgement comes from lack of experience, perceived disrespect, and perceived showing off. One of the repliers suggests leaving a Yeti cooler in the car with cool drinks inside to enjoy after the hike. The user makes mention of this not to say that

they have a Yeti to boast, but in the context of giving the other community members ideas on how to enjoy the end of their trip better. This is not entirely an identification of the self, but this same user does identify that they have a wife. This is relevant to the topic being discussed because their wife goes with them when they hike, so even though they are an external person, the fact that the user has a wife is indeed relevant to the subreddit topic. Therefore, in this thread, no one identifies anything about themselves that is not related to the topic.

In Emily van der Nagel's 2013 paper, "Faceless Bodies: Negotiating Technological and Cultural Codes on reddit gonewild", van der Nagel explores anonymity on the reddit bulletin "reddit gonewild". The author asserts that online anonymity is a cornerstone of interaction on the internet. Van der Nagel explores this concept in the next paragraph which talks about how anonymity can cause harm on the community, and how attempts have been made to legislate it. In the next paragraph, van der Nagel counters the previous information with writing about how many people on the internet prefer anonymity even with its negatives. The author asserts that people online "recognized that not only polite comments contributed usefulness to conversations" in regards to the issue of people using anonymity to be rude. In the final paragraph of the introduction, van der Nagel explains that when anonymity is not given, people will create anonymity by hiding their physical identity, and wraps up her controlling idea that anonymity is essential to some online communities. Reddit gonewild, as the author suggests, has its anonymity enforced through social and technological guidelines. R/campingandhiking has anonymity mainly enforced through social guidelines. According to van der Nagel, usernames on Reddit are made to avoid divulging any social information. This is similar to r/campingandhiking, where personal information is not shared without a reason. According to van der Nagel, even following the rules of total anonymity carries the risk of "drawing criticism and abuse". In the threads which were observed in the results section, there were no clear punishments for breaking anonymity, but that seems to be a difference in the two communities. Whereas users on r/campingandhiking may identify themselves if it is relevant because of the social environment and focus on being helpful, reddit gonewild does not have these provisions and appears to be much stricter with their social guidelines as is shown in van der Nagel's writing.(van der Nagel,2013,pg.1-10)

In the 2010 article "Radical Opacity" by Julian Dibbell, the author studies 4chans origins and online anonymity. The focus of the anonymity portions of the article explain how and why there is anonymity on 4chan. The writer echoes 4chan creator Tim Poole by saying that anonymity on the internet is favored because it gives people freedom. Anonymous users on websites like 4chan can voice their opinion without the fear of backlash or punishment, writes Dibbell, which allows them to be their true selves. The examples that the author puts forth for the benefits of anonymity are to "(explore an unconventional sexuality, seek treatment for a stigmatized disease)". With a rise in social media like Facebook, the concept of anonymity on the internet has become more strained according to the author, and internet culture is drifting away from its anonymous roots. What this means in the context of r/campingandhiking is that perhaps the reason for anonymity is because it is more freeing. In the light which the author describes it, 4chan appears to be more anonymous than r/campingandhiking, and unlike the subreddit very few 4chan users have a username. If as the author says "Though Poole himself is known to the site's users by the cryptic pseudonym "moot," on 4chan even using a pseudonym is rare.", then perhaps a lower level of anonymity is acceptable for higher members of the community. This would explain why the SAR user was able to break the rules of anonymity. (Dibbell, 2020,paragraph 4-6)

Discussion

Anonymity is a major part of internet culture and is woven into the fabric of many websites. The anonymity of websites varies in degrees, from totally unacceptable to divulge personal information to very open (Dibbell,2010,paragraph 5). In the subreddit r/campingandhiking, self-identification is rare unless it is necessary. What this suggests is that some users on the internet will prefer anonymity even when it is not enforced by rules or enforced vigorously socially.

There is no rule against these redditers identifying themselves by name as if they were using a totally anonymous bulletin like reddit gonewild(van der Nagel,2013, page 1-2), but they choose not to for their own reasons. That may be freedom of expression, to keep conversation short, or simply because they can. As anonymity on the internet comes to a close with the rise of social media

(Dibbell,2010,paragraph 5), the subreddit r/campingandhiking remains a place where people can talk in an online setting and remain anonymous unless their identification is needed for the topic or question at hand.

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