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VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY: A DISCUSSION OF THE TOOL'S SPECIFICITY

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ABSTRACT

The rapid flow of online information, increased user interactivity across digital platforms and virtual communities, and their potential effects on individual identity, culture, and belonging have become an important topic for ethnographic research. This research has developed a virtual methodology of new tools to help explore how technologies shape societal behaviors. This includes understanding the influence of social media on personal opinions, as well as investigating the impact of online advertising and gaming on identity development. virtual ethnography is therefore essential for understanding the role of technology in contemporary life.

This study aims to establish virtual ethnography as a new type of qualitative research that studies online communities and their interactions through interactive media. It is concerned with the impact of these interactions on lifestyles, culture, identity, and other social and ethnic data that ethnographic studies specialize in in their natural environment.

KEYWORDS

Ethnography, Tool, Virtual Space, Virtual Ethnography, Qualitative Research

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Introduction.

The increased use of digital technology has had a significant impact on individuals' thoughts and behaviours. This impact has become more evident and concerning due to rapid technological advancements and the emergence of digital citizens and virtual communities.

In the contemporary business world, many digital social phenomena are emerging that are challenging the limits of traditional research methods and tools. In response to this changing landscape, researchers have developed innovative digital methodologies that are tailored to the unique characteristics of these new digital phenomena.

Virtual ethnography has emerged as a key approach in studying digital communities, with tools being continually refined to meet the specific needs of digital ethnography.

An Internet user is not analogous to a TV viewer, a radio listener, a newspaper or magazine reader, a viewer of videos on a website like YouTube or Netflix, or a moviegoer. Similarly, a member of a virtual group interested in the activity of its members and shares their interests and activities with them is not similar to a member of a group or social organisation in the neighbourhood where they live. These differences can be attributed to the fact that the digital space is virtual and does not resemble reality, even if it tries to present a virtual version of it.

This is because the individual naturally acquires the characteristics of space and acts through them. He acquires a digital identity, digital belonging, and digital citizenship, and adopts the ideas of other virtual identities of digital citizens, each of whom seeks to showcase their strengths and conceal their weaknesses.

Individual users of social networking sites create a digital persona, represented by the medium itself and the screen, and this can make them more willing to engage with unfamiliar societies, potentially merging with

their group and their original culture, even if they are not fully aware of the separation from their group and culture.

Such new phenomena associated with individual and collective behaviours resulting from the individual's affiliation as a user of digital media and its contents, and his integration into its communities, make it a new topic that requires qualitative research to access more diverse information about it. Topics of this nature require the use of new tools and methods, such as the virtual ethnographic approach.

This enables the study of digital communities, their characteristics and interactions, by employing traditional ethnographic tools and adding new digital tools and methods commensurate with the nature of the digital communities studied.

Qualitative research in the digital space has made it possible to conduct more in-depth studies and obtain more diverse results, due to its freedom from the constraints of space and time. The researcher can reach the respondent anywhere in the world, participate and observe him at any time. This is especially true in light of the technological tide and the expansion of digital societies and the joining of millions of people to networked societies.

Virtual ethnography has been able to accelerate and facilitate research in digital societies thanks to its rapidly adapting tools to digital technological media. It facilitates reaching large numbers of respondents online and obtaining their consent for participation in research. It also enables him to make more in-depth observations and provides him with the opportunity to participate in research groups.

In light of his increasing ability to be present with them everywhere and at all times through remote digital communication, it is no longer difficult to organize in-depth interviews with distant respondents.

Virtual ethnography facilitates the study of the structure of digital societies and how individuals interact within social networks, as well as the cultural dynamics that prevail in the digital environment. In this environment, the culture of the individual merges with the other in a common digital culture.

Virtual or digital ethnography tools also facilitate understanding of the relationships that arise between virtual groups and the interactions between them through in-depth interviews and participation in their groups in different digital environments, such as online gaming platforms or virtual conferences.

Virtual ethnography is of great importance in the study of digital societies, which is why we are interested in studying and introducing it. We will present its methods and address the specificity of its tools as a new qualitative research approach.

This approach enables researchers to conduct deeper studies of virtual societies with all the cultures and practices they carry. We will provide an understanding of the reality of virtual ethnography and how to apply it and employ its tools.

By answering the following sub-questions:

1. What is virtual ethnography?
2. When did virtual ethnography first appear?
3. What are the main ideas behind virtual ethnography?
4. How can you use virtual ethnography?
5. What is the purpose of the tool in virtual ethnographic research?

1. The concept of virtual ethnography

The word 'ethnography' is made up of two parts: 'ethno', which means 'race' or 'people', and 'graphy', which means 'description'. So, ethnography is a description of different cultures, including their religions, customs, races, traditions, cultures, lifestyles and civilisations over time, as well as how they interact with other cultures.

The research method called ethnography is where a researcher takes part in the lives of the people being studied, either openly or secretly if the research needs it. The results of this research are more intense and meaningful because it is done over a long period of time. This lets the researcher become part of the research community and record a wider range of rich reactions.

It is both a research method and a written result of analyzing qualitative and field research data. Anthropologists and many others such as Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and Taylor have described it as a "flexible, responsive methodology, sensitive to emerging phenomena and emergent research questions, used to create an understanding of cultural behavior" (Haverinen, 2015, p.79).

Virtual ethnography, which is the basis of this research, is defined as: "a qualitative approach to collecting data on virtual communities, which aims to observe the ratings and rankings of respondents, to achieve a deeper understanding of their behaviors and feelings, it tries to provide an adequate answer to the question "why?" (Skageby, 2011, p.411).

As the virtual or digital ethnographic approach achieves its goal of studying digital communities through the virtual space represented in the World Wide Web, researchers must carefully select specific groups and determine the type of interactive technology used to access these communities.

Virtual ethnography is an ideal way to analyse communication networks spread over the Internet. It can be used to understand the nature of digital societies by studying the understanding of virtual communication contexts among its members. Virtual groups that are mainly formed by engaging in groups on social networking sites can also be studied. The individual or user is considered a unit for analysing the virtual collective.

This is achieved through interview procedures and observations of the user's participation in the studied groups. This process enables the understanding of group dynamics, ways of interaction among members, and the cultural contexts through which interactions take place. It also explores how the individual is affected by the culture of the group.

2. The emergence of virtual ethnography:

Following the widespread adoption of the Internet at the close of the previous century and the subsequent evolution of its platforms to mirror the current World Wide Web's array of information and communication resources, the quantity and calibre of its users experienced a notable surge. This development paved the way for the emergence of novel audience categories, such as digital, virtual, and electronic audiences, among others .

These developments have created a new imperative: the need to develop new methodological methods to study these audiences using these sites, or to update the traditional methodological methods and adapt them to the developments of the digital environment. There have been many attempts to apply the ethnographic method to understand how users adapt in the digital environment and integrate into virtual groups different from their original groups. This has helped ethnography to develop its tools and led to the emergence of virtual or virtual ethnography, which is concerned with studying audiences using new media.

Virtual ethnography is a research response to current conditions and the development of communication, taking into account the significant and rapid technological advancements that have transformed the form, methods, nature and subject of communication in modern digital and knowledge societies. It aims to adapt ethnographic research to digital requirements, making it suitable for research into virtual phenomena, cultures and environments.

Virtual ethnography is defined as an ethnographic research methodology that is carried out through the Internet. Ethnographers are interested in studying culture, and they may become immersed in the study they carry out, and be influenced by the culture they are researching.

Consequently, numerous researchers across various disciplines have designated virtual ethnography as any qualitative research that employs ethnographic research tools to study virtual communities through the network. Among the most widely used terms to describe virtual ethnography is the formula proposed by Roberto Cosentes, who merged the words "Internet" and "ethnography" to create the term "Internet ethnography".

The process of employing the ethnographic method in the study of virtual communities and audiences using new technological media and their contents has been labeled by several terms used by studies in different contexts conducted between the end of the 1990s and 2012, including the following:

- At the end of the 1990s, with the development of the Internet and the emergence and spread of its websites, thinking began to develop new approaches to respond to the current developments that arose as a result of the spread of the Internet and easy access to it in many countries of the world.

- In 2000, Hine's study "Virtual ethnography" emphasized the importance of Cyber-Ethnography, and that it "is based on several considerations, as it is not only concerned with the question: How do people use the Internet? How do their practices give meaning to the Internet in their local contexts?" (Hine, 2000, p.7).

- Then several studies were conducted, mainly based on the use of virtual observation within ethnographic studies as a basic tool "which is carried out in the contexts of studying groups online and is divided into observation by participation, and among the studies that used the tool is the study of Drentea & Cross in 2005" (Drentea & Cross, 2005, p.9).

- In 2008, "Charnet & Veyrier conducted their study on digital media using the ethnographic method and called the method Digital Ethnography" (Charnet & Veyrier, 2008, p. 32).

- In 2009, ethnography was employed in the study of cyberspace and the method was called "Cyberspace Ethnography" (Na'amneh, 2009, p.174).

- In 2011, Evans conducted his study on "Web ethnography" (Evans, 2010, p. 11), and many studies in the same period called the studies in the same context Netnography.
- In 2012, Postill & Pink focused on "Social Media Ethnography" (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 123).

3. Principles of Virtual Ethnography

In her book *Virtual Ethnography*, the researcher identified ten principles of virtual ethnography, summarized as follows (Christine Hine, 2000, p.63-64-65):

1. According to Hine, ethnographic researchers must be present in the field and deeply involved in the daily lives of participants to avoid ambiguity and confusion when understanding interactions and realising their reality. Virtual ethnography is therefore used to eliminate ambiguity and reduce the confusion that can be raised by the responses and lifestyles of others.

At the same time, ethnography can be a tool to provoke the same ambiguity and bewilderment by displacing the dull sense of familiarity that hides the ambiguity of our ability to cognitively connect with others, as virtual ethnography is used as a means to problematize the use of the internet: The Internet's sensitivity is not inherent; it is acquired through its utilisation. The Internet has become an integral part of people's daily lives, playing a significant role in communication and the formation of communities. Its use, interpretation and reinterpretation varies greatly across different individuals and groups.

2. Interactive media presents both a challenge and an opportunity for cyberspace, by questioning the notion of an interactive site. It is important to understand that cyberspace should not be viewed as a realm isolated from all connections to "real life" and face-to-face interactions. It has rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used. It relies on technologies that are used and understood differently in different contexts, and that must be acquired, learned, interpreted and contextualized.

These technologies demonstrate a high degree of interpretive flexibility. Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both a product of culture and a cultural product. Examining either aspect in isolation results in a limited perspective.

3. The growth of cross-media interaction means that it is no longer necessary to think of ethno-ethnic culture as being located in particular places, or even multi-located. Investigating the idea of making and remaking space through interactions via digital media is an excellent opportunity for an ethnographic approach. In terms of ethnography, intermediality can be considered as mobile rather than multisited.

4. Consequently, the concept of field location is being reconsidered. If culture and community are not intuitively located in place, then neither is ethnography. The focus of ethnographic inquiry should be shifted towards a focus on flow and connectivity, rather than on location and boundaries as an organizing principle.

5. Boundaries are not presupposed, but explored through the ethnographic trajectory. The challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the establishment of boundaries and connections, especially between the "virtual" and the "real".

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However, this raises the question of when to cease these activities. If we were to consider the notion of ethnography (and/or culture) as having natural boundaries for the purposes of analysis, we would also have to consider abandoning the idea of a complete ethnography of something. The decision to halt ethnographic research is a pragmatic one. The ethnographic subject itself can be reformulated with each decision, either following another link or following specific steps. In practice, its scope is limited by the ethnographer's own limitations.

6. Temporal dislocation is often associated with spatial dislocation. The interaction with mediated contexts, that is to say, via digital media, and interactions in other domains and with other media. Virtual ethnography is an interstitial ethnography, in that it fits into the real-life activities of the ethnographer, the subjects, and the participants. Immersion in the environment is only realised intermittently.

7. Virtual ethnography is, by its very nature, a partial account. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive description of any informant, site, or culture. The notion that there are pre-existing informants, sites, and cultures that can be isolated and described is incomplete. Our accounts can be based on strategically relevant ideas rather than faithful representations of objective realities.

8. Virtual ethnography involves extensive engagement in cross-media interaction. This type of engagement adds a new dimension to exploring how media is used in multiple contexts.

The ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight, and virtual ethnography can utilise the ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension of role reversal. The use of

technology in ethnographic research is an integral component, as is the interaction between ethnographers and technology.

9. New interaction technologies allow informants to be both absent and present in ethnography simultaneously. In the same way, the ethnographer is simultaneously absent from and present with informants. These relationships, established through technology, can be transient or permanent and take place across temporal and spatial divides.

It is important to note that ethnographic validity applies to all forms of interaction, not just face-to-face interactions. The formation of the ethnographic object is made possible by the available technologies, and this is virtual ethnography, or in virtual space, or through virtual space.

10. Virtual ethnography is not only virtual in the sense of disembodied. The term 'virtual' also carries connotations of 'not quite' or 'imperfection'. It is sufficient and adequate for practical purposes even if it is not entirely real (although this definition of 'virtual' is often suppressed in favour of more fashionable alternatives).

Virtual ethnography is an adequate method for exploring relationships of interaction through digital interactive media, even if it is not entirely realistic from a methodological perspective. This is because it is an adaptive ethnography that adapts to the circumstances in which it finds itself.

4. Methods of Applying Virtual Ethnography

"The ethnographic approach in communication research is not limited to revealing differences in customs and practices, defining ICTs through scientific investigation, and focusing on groups through in-depth interviews, but is a constructivist approach to technology that enables the researcher to be able to provide a full understanding of the social context built around the technology" (Domingo, 2003, p.03).

According to (Evans, 2010, pp. 12), there are two basic methods for conducting ethnographic research online:

The first method: Evaluating sources related to the interaction:

Evans's approach emphasises the utilisation of digital sources in ethnographic research, encompassing a wide range of materials encountered in the digital realm, including: Researchers may observe and record images, emoticons and other sources from a distance, without the respondents' participation in their daily social interactions in the virtual space.

This approach treats digital ethnographic research as a mere digital method or tool to access sources in the digital space, and as an adjunct to traditional research.

The second Method : The researcher's participation in the studied communication environment:

According to Evans, this method involves the researcher participating in all aspects of the communication environment under study. While it may compromise objectivity, it facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of user interactions.

This approach is founded on the premise that researchers must engage fully with their respondents in the digital space. This enables them to gain deeper insights into respondents' interactions and experiences, fostering a more profound level of immersion within the research groups. This method maintains the distinct nature of digital tools in ethnographic research, treating them as independent instruments with their own content and results, distinct from traditional research methods and their outputs.

5. The Specificity of the Tool in Virtual Ethnographic Research

Online ethnographic tools are an important research topic in the field of social networks. This is because research is based on the qualitative methodology of social research, while incorporating traditional methodological tools and methods for research in the virtual space with its various sites, networks, and contents.

Online ethnography, for instance, is based on the study of consumer behaviour and online communities, and is primarily concerned with examining and analysing online reviews, discussions and interactions on a specific topic. The software's capabilities extend to screen recording, social network analysis, and the examination of archived content on online platforms.

Virtual ethnographic research employs innovative new methods that are not related to traditional ethnographic methods. These include exploring virtual spaces, such as online gaming environments, virtual worlds and virtual reality platforms. The aim is to observe and document social interactions, behaviours and cultural practices within these digital worlds.

Conducting interviews within virtual environments, such as online gaming platforms or virtual conferences. This approach enables researchers to examine how individuals interact in digital or virtual spaces and the cultural dynamics that influence these interactions.

Digital ethnographic research tools are distinguished by their relationship to the manner in which the researcher employs the digital tool, the computer, and the manner in which the researcher navigates the Internet as a user. Online ethnographic research is frequently based on spontaneous and non-purposeful browsing of websites.

In this case, the researcher's attention is centred on the virtual tool and immersed in one of the pages and websites of the network, observing people, actions, discourses, and everything that happens in them on a regular basis. These subjective experiences become a source to shape the researcher's research identity and help them select their respondents.

Therefore, the following points summarise the characteristics that distinguish the virtual ethnographic tool from the traditional one, and the benefits of using it:

- Digital blogging, video recordings, and virtual groups in different locations can facilitate the researcher's participation in the studied research groups, remotely, without the trouble of traveling and wasting time trying to reach them.

- Virtual ethnographic tools enable a deeper understanding of the new human phenomenon, namely understanding individuals' social interactions with all their contents in digital spaces, especially since people exhibit different behaviors, attitudes, and personalities in the digital space that differ from their real reality and who they are.

- The digital tools used in virtual ethnographic research help improve the researcher's experience within the research environment and live it in all its details, which is a more accurate, authentic, and profound experience than filling out questionnaires or sending them through other methods or calling by phone.

- Digital ethnographic tools provide greater autonomy for the researcher, who does not need the help of co-researchers or any third party in light of the ease of access to his/her research community.

- Virtual ethnographic tools enable the researcher to obtain more accurate and objective data from the respondents' comments and notations, which they make freely and can be considered as independent responses and interactions.

- The digital ethnographic tool increases the chances of generating information that leads to rich results, thanks to the great contribution of the respondent who feels comfortable responding to the researcher while sharing information since they are in the digital space.

- Digital tools often make the respondent more honest and frank with the participating researcher, as his presence, which is his favorite space for communication and spending time, makes him answer questions directly and frankly because he is active in a virtual space with a virtual identity, as he believes that no one sees him and no one hears him from his real-life environment. His real information cannot be leaked.

Conclusions

Ethnographers have attempted to transition their research to the domain of ethnography and cultural studies on the Internet. This endeavour has involved the employment of novel tools, primarily encompassing the adaptation of digital media and websites to serve ethnographic research purposes. Consequently, new concepts and methodologies for ethnographic research on the Internet have emerged. This qualitative research has demonstrated numerous advantages.

However, it should be noted that the efficiency of employing digital space and time and the new tool does not mean that ethnographic research abandons its traditional traditions and tools.

These are the basis of its existence and constitute the originality of ethnographic research and distinguish it from other qualitative research. As many scholars emphasise, there is a need to adhere to the established traditions of studying human races and cultures even in the case of studying them online. The adoption of the digital tool in research does not mean that it is completely isolated from the nature of ethnographic research based on the traditional tool.

Researchers in the field of ethnography were divided into two trends. The initial trend posits that ethnographic research continues to be regarded as both authentic and unique in nature. This is due to the fact that it is research which studies human interactions in daily life. The practice of ethnographic rituals on the Internet does not transform it into a method; rather, it remains a tool for specific research conducted in the digital context.

The second trend is predicated on the conviction that the transition of ethnographic research to the study of human cultures and ethnicities in cyberspace is both inevitable and necessary for the development of ethnographic research. The adoption of new methods and tools for ethnographic research on the Internet

represents a new and unique approach to qualitative research, compelling us to develop it and consider new assumptions and concepts.

However, it is the contention of this paper that ethnographic research, as a research specialised in the study of human ethnicity, must adapt to the nature of the technological development in which humans are currently living. It is therefore the duty of ethnographers to preserve the originality of the ethnographic method and tool, whilst developing them to suit the requirements of studying ethnicity in the digital space.

The imperative for ethnographic research is to maintain its originality whilst developing its tools to adapt to novel circumstances, ensuring its applicability in all geographical and temporal contexts, The ethnographic research must maintain its originality and develop its tools to adapt to novel circumstances, while also being applicable in all places and at all times.

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