



Reconceptualizing Community through Digital Ethnography -A theoretical review-

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Abstract:

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has profoundly transformed how social life is organized, experienced, and studied. That why digital ethnography has emerged as a critical methodological approach for examining how communities are constructed, maintained, in online and hybrid environments. This article provide a comprehensive overview of the methodological and theoretical implications of digital ethnography in the study of online communities. we argue that communities are emergent, fluid, and networked constellations enacted and interpreted across online and offline spaces. We also explore how digital ethnography has evolved to capture the complexities of community formation, identity, and governance in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Ethnography, Netnography,Community, Online Sociality, Online Communities.



1. INTRODUCTION

Community has long been an important subject matter within the social sciences. In classical approaches to community, social units were conceptualized either in parallelographs (Tönnies, 1887 / 2001) or within "The sedentary bias": this is the idea that social cohesion necessarily entails residence in a specific territory. (Malkki, 1992)

However, the emergence of the current paradigm of digital communication technologies has challenged all these presumptions. Social interactions have shifted from physical spaces to the internet, social media platforms, gaming sites, and global networks. This has challenged the paradigm that social groups should be physically present.

As a result of these changes, the field of digital ethnography has developed as a methodology and theory that has the capability to grasp the complex processes that occur through the use of digital media. Through the principles of ethnographic research being taken into the online world, the ability to analyze the construction of online communities has developed. (Pink et al, 2016).

This paper advances a reconceptualization of communities by integrating digital ethnography as a methodological and theoretical lens for studying online, hybrid, and emergent communities. Digital ethnography has emerged as a key method for understanding how communities are formed, sustained, and transformed in digitally mediated environments. It not only extends traditional ethnography into online spaces but also pushes scholars to rethink what "community" means when social life is distributed across platforms, devices, and hybrid online–offline practice. Drawing on a broad set of scholarly works that articulate digital ethnography, netnography, and related approaches, we synthesize how online environments reconfigure communal formation, identity, solidarity, governance, and memory. This study to explore the following research problem:

How do researchers Reconceptualize Community through Digital Ethnography.

To tackle this primary research problem, we follow a specific methodology that allows for a comprehensive approach:

- **Methodological Implications: What Makes Digital Ethnography Ethnographic?**
- **Theoretical Background: From Bounded Groups to Fluid Social Formations;**
- **Notions of Community: Belonging, Identity, and Governance in Digital Spaces;**
- **Methodological ethnographic innovation in studying online communities;**
- **Ethical and Epistemological Futures of Community Research.**



2-Methodological Implications: What Makes Digital Ethnography Ethnographic?

Digital ethnography has emerged as a central methodological approach for studying communities in technologically mediated environments. This paper synthesizes diverse work on online, netnographic, and cyber-ethnographic methods to articulate a reconceptualization of community that foregrounds digitally constituted sociality, connective contexts, and participatory storytelling.

Netnography as a part from digital ethnography provides a methodological framework for studying virtual communities with attention to online practices, identities, and cultures. It foregrounds the ethical and practical considerations of researching online groups, including concerns about covert participation, observer identities, and the social consequences of data collection in digital environments (Esquinas et al, 2019) .

The methodological reflexivity in digital ethnography encourages researchers to problematize the boundary between researchers and the community, a shift that itself reshapes how we understand community as a relational construct.

In another hand, digital ethnography integrates qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to capture the complexities of online life. Studies on online dating environments, for instance, demonstrate how covert digital ethnography, participant observation and reflexive researcher positions can yield rich data about online communities, while acknowledging risk and ethical considerations (Esquinas et al.,2019) . Other digital-social studies combine sentiment analysis, real-time monitoring, and social-network analyses to enhance fieldwork, resulting in a more detailed understanding of how digital communities form, evolve, and sustain themselves .(Salsa et al, 2025),

Therefore digital ethnography encompasses netnography, virtual ethnography, online participant observation, and multimodal data practices that combine textual, visual, audio, and behavioral traces from online spaces with offline ethnographic data. This methodological plurality allows researchers to capture routines, mobilities, and socialities of digital life. (Hallett & Barber, 2013)

Furthermore digital ethnography required substantial methodological adaptations from traditional approaches. Data collection techniques evolved to accommodate textual and multimodal digital content. Kozinets described netnographic data as primarily textual, consisting of downloaded newsgroup postings, and email exchanges, with the advantage that data emerged “already transcribed”. This eliminated some vagaries of memory but privileged verbal-rational states over nonverbal-emotional one. (Kozinets ,2022)



Immersive netnography extends traditional netnography into immersive technologies (virtual reality, AR, metaverse), providing a framework for studying service experiences and user practices in immersive environments while maintaining qualitative rigor). This approach reflects a broader trend towards methodological pluralism, blending ethnographic sensitivity with computational and infrastructural considerations of new media. (Kozinets ,2022)

The researchers must decide how visibly to participate, whether to embrace or resist anonymity, and how these choices affect the depth and “thickness” of data .Multi sited digital ethnography, which follows participants across platforms and field sites, has proven especially useful for engaging stigmatized or hard to reach communities, where digital spaces function as crucial arenas of sociality and mutual support. (Masullo & Coppola,2023)

3. Theoretical Background: From Bounded Groups to Fluid Social Formations:

Classical community studies often presupposed relatively bounded, co-located groups. As everyday life has become pervaded by digital platforms, ethnographers argue that “natural habitats” now include online environments, requiring a reconceptualization of space, interaction, and what counts as community. (Ritter, 2021).

For the same reason,“Williams” drew on theories of intentional and symbolic community to reconceptualize virtual worlds. He emphasized that communities form through meaningful interactions and shared frames of reference rather than physical proximity, introducing the concept of temporary intentional communities. This framework acknowledged that virtual communities are both purposefully chosen and temporally bounded. (Williams, 2009).

Hutchings linked findings to networked individualism theory, suggesting a shift from bounded community structures toward more fluid, individualized forms of belonging. This theoretical lens helped explain how online churches navigated between familiarity and difference, isolation and integration

Additionally, the digital ethnography foregrounds social formations around focal objects, issues, or identities, rather than pre-given, stable “online communities.” “Caliandro” proposes mapping how users and devices assemble around brands, topics, or events, distinguishing community, public, and crowd as different configurations of association and engagement (Caliandro, 2017). Systematic and scoping reviews similarly show that digital ethnography encompasses diverse field types—social media ethnography, contextual and meta digital ethnography, and cross media ethnography—each tracking different forms of collective life. Here is a breakdown of how communities exist within this space:



3.1 Communities across the Digital–Physical Continuum:

The Digital–Physical Continuum considers the 'real world' and the 'internet' to be a single, interconnected environment where technology is integrated into the fabric of physical reality.

The concept—the Digital–Physical Continuum—is, The specific framework of a "continuum" between the physical and virtual was famously pioneered by Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino in 1994, and later expanded upon by sociologists like Nathan Jurgenson to describe our integrated reality.

Reconceptualizing community through digital ethnography implies a rethinking of field, fieldwork, and membership. Digital ethnographers now practice multi sited or un sited fieldwork, following people, practices, and data across platforms and temporalities rather than remaining in a single site. Participation can involve lurking, liking, commenting, joining groups, or co creating content, and requires careful reflexivity about how these acts shape the field itself. (Caliandro, A. 2017).

Ethnographers emphasize that digital and physical interactions are entangled rather than separate domains. Studies of organizational settings, education, civic activism, and everyday sociality show that digital artifacts (emails, posts, chats, platforms) create new modes of co presence that must be integrated into ethnographic accounts of community. (Masullo & Coppola,2023).

Hallett and Barber argue that to fully understand local issues and “offline” community life, researchers must follow participants into their online habitats, treating digital traces and interactions as integral to fieldwork rather than supplemental data (Hallett & Barber , 2014). Similarly, organizational ethnography shows that digital artifacts can function both as archives and as ongoing processes, enabling researchers to trace how collective meanings and voices circulate within communities over time. (Masullo & Coppola,2023).

Consequently, digital ethnography fundamentally challenges traditional ethnographic notions of “the field” as a bounded geographic location. “Derya Kulavuz-Onal and colleagues” argued that in netnographic contexts, the field must be reconceptualized from physical locations to sets of practices and activities across multiple online platforms. This multi-site community existed across Yahoo Groups, social media, wikis, and blogs, with its boundaries defined by shared practices related to web-based technologies in language teaching rather than a single platform. The



community's activities and practices, not geography, defined its existence. (Kulavuz-Onal& Vásquez, 2013)

The same idea shared by Wellman (2001), when he argued that social life is organized around “networked individualism,” where individuals belong to multiple, overlapping social networks rather than a single, cohesive community. Digital technologies intensify this shift by enabling constant connectivity across spatial and temporal boundaries.

3.2.Interfaces, Platforms, and the Shaping of Community:

Digital ethnography has begun to treat platforms and interfaces as constitutive elements of community rather than neutral containers. Ritter combines participant observation with technical walkthroughs of interfaces to uncover how platform affordances encode sociocultural assumptions and shape the symbolic meanings available to users (Ritter, 2021). Interface ethnography reveals how communities of practice orient their skilled labor toward platforms, co producing both technical artifacts and professional identities.

Researchers in digital ethnography also highlight how research fields may be defined by contextual fields (blogs, forums, platforms) or by decontextualized narratives aggregated through tags and hashtags, each configuration fostering different kinds of social formations .The move from bounded “groups” to networked publics, algorithmically assembled crowds, and issue based collectivities demands that community be reconceptualized in relation to platform logics and data infrastructures . (Caliandro, 2017).

3.3. Online-Offline Relationships and Hybrid Spaces

The relationship between online and offline dimensions of community emerged as complex and varied. Communities existed on a spectrum from purely virtual to deeply integrated hybrid formation. The intertwining of online and offline identities varied by community context. Williams found that online communities complemented offline identities and activities, with online interactions influencing offline behaviors and vice vers. (Williams, 2009).

Digital ethnography challenges traditional boundary-making by revealing memberships that are fluid, context-dependent, and contingent on platform affordances. The fluidity of participation—where individuals can be present in multiple online communities (and occasionally participate in offline settings that connect to those online worlds)—complicates conventional notions of a bounded, stable “community.” This is echoed in discussions about digital family networks and



cross-border socialities where participation is distributed across online and offline spheres. (Winarnita, 2019).

3.4. Community as networked, performative, and affective constellations

Digital ethnography reveals communities as networks of practice, identity work, and solidarities that are sustained through online communication channels, apps, and platform-mediated interactions. Studies of private chat groups among food-delivery workers illustrate how instant messaging affordances enable learning, resistance, and solidarity within a globalized labor constellation, highlighting communal ties forged through asynchronous, private digital spaces rather than public, location-based gatherings (Bonini et al, 2023). This demonstrates a reconfiguration of community in which affective bonds and mutual aid are mobilized through platform-enabled networks.

And since the communities are better understood as performative assemblages of practices, identities, and networks that arise through everyday interactions across multiple environments. Digital ethnography foregrounds how participants co-create meanings, negotiate power, and delineate boundaries of belonging in online spaces (Hallett & Barber, 2013). The reconceptualization emphasizes processuality—communities are dynamic trajectories rather than fixed entities—and situates online culture as integral to social life rather than peripheral to it (Murthy, 2008)

The experience of grief, attachment, and collective memory in digital worlds also reframes community as a multi-sited, emotionally interlinked phenomenon. A multi-sited ethnography on the shutdown of a Chinese World of Warcraft server reveals grief and collective identity formation across server communities, WeChat groups, and online forums—emphasizing that communal belonging can persist through digital disconnections and transtemporal, cross-platform sociality (Xu & Wildt, 2024). Such findings illustrate how communities endure as repertoires of shared meanings and affective attachments that are distributed across digital ecosystems.

Netnographic case studies of conspiracy cultures and digital anti-vaccination communities for instance , show how communities cohere through shared interpretations, cultural scripts, and political-economic contexts that are mediated by digital networks. These investigations illuminate how online communities generate and circulate beliefs, with identity, solidarity, and collective action bound up with digital discourse and algorithmic affordances (Halska-Pionka & Cheba, 2024). The implication for community theory is that shared meaning, allegiance, and collectiveness can arise and persist in online spaces even in the absence of conventional communal institutions or physical proximity.



4. Notions of Community: Belonging, Identity, and Governance in Digital Spaces

4.1 Belonging and Identity

Digital ethnography reveals belonging as a process of ongoing negotiation across online spaces. Members curate shared meanings, practices, and affective ties through everyday interactions, rituals, and content production. Studies of online consumer and identity communities (e.g., netnographic studies of social media pages, brands, and fandoms) illustrate how communities cohere around shared symbols, narratives, and practices even as they migrate across platforms (Marisha & Sharma, 2023)

Online and offline communities converge in producing shared identities, as digital ethnography reveals how platforms mediate belonging, culture, and social norms. Netnography and virtual ethnography show how online interactions contribute to a sense of community that transcends geographic boundaries while offline contexts anchor and reframe digital practices. Studies of specific digital communities (e.g., online gaming, social movements, religious communities) illustrate how digital ethnography captures sociocultural practices, rituals, and identity performances across platforms. (Hine, 2017)

4.2 Governance, Policy, and Digital Negotiation

Digital ethnography examines governance and policy dimensions as online Immersive and cybernetic spaces pose new questions for service design and consumer experience, where ethnographers study how service experiences unfold in metaverse contexts and how communities mobilize around digital platforms for governance or collective action (Kozinets ,2022).

On the other hand ,ethnography illuminates how online communities participate in politics, mobilize support, and shape public discourse. Netnographic studies of elections and platforms show how online environments enable political participation, debate quality, and sentiment formation, while also revealing the tension between digital affordances and traditional political institutions (Kosiński et al, 2015)

4.3 Methodological Pluralism and Community-Event Studies

The field benefits from methodological pluralism that combines traditional ethnography with netnography and computational methods to study various communities, including online religious practices, environmental campaigns, (Cartledge, 2022), The pluralism allows for better understanding of how communities persist, adapt, and evolve in and outside of digital spaces.



5-Methodological ethnographic innovation in studying online communities:

Future community research is likely to combine small data ethnography—deep, qualitative engagement—with new forms of digital social data and computational tools. Advocates of qualitative digital ethnography stress the value of small-scale, context-rich studies of digital practices, phenomena, and social communities, underscoring the need to embed ethics at every stage of research (Cocq & Liliequist, 2024).

At the same time, digital team ethnography illustrates how collaborative, interdisciplinary projects can use digital tools to sustain reflexive fieldwork and manage the “explosion” of social media data in studies of everyday platform use, such as social media in later life (Beneito Montagut et al, 2017). Team-based approaches support “thick” description while accommodating large, dynamic fields and enabling dialogue-driven knowledge production .

From a sociological perspective, emergent “computational ethnography” blends ethnographic principles with digital data and computational methods. Rather than treating ethnography as a fixed technique applied to new data types, scholars call for rethinking what ethnography is and how it might be recomposed with digital tools in an emerging “computational anthropology” (Brooker, 2022). This points toward futures in which community is examined through iterative interplay between deep field engagement and large-scale digital trace analysis.

5-1 Small data ethnography as enduring practice :

Traditional ethnography prioritized deep engagement, participant observation, and contextual interpretation within particular sites or communities. This remains foundational even as researchers increasingly leverage large or heterogeneous data sources (Brooker, 2022) . The emphasis on in-depth local understanding remains central to ethnographic legitimacy (Hallett & Barber, 2013).

Acknowledging the enduring value of small data, researchers emphasize reflective practice, transparency, and methodological triangulation to sustain rigor in varied field contexts , triangulation across methods supports objectivity claims within design-rich ethnography (Brooker, 2022) .

5-2 Emergence of computational ethnography

Computational ethnography situates ethnography within algorithmic platforms, big data contexts, and digital infrastructures. It extends the toolkit to analyze digital traces, social media logged activities, and computationally generated patterns while retaining ethnographic aims of



understanding meaning and social action (Christin, 2020; , (Brooker, 2022)). This approach integrates ethnographic principles with data science tools to illuminate online social life and organizational dynamics .Algorithmic ethnography conceptualizes studying how computational systems shape online behavior and discourse (Christin, 2020).

In sociology and related fields, commentators argue for “methods mashups” that apply ethnographic reasoning to digital data and computational processes (Brooker, 2022) .

5-3 The scope of digital and online ethnography

Digital ethnography has matured into a set of practices for studying online communities, routine online activities, and cross-media interactions, while addressing ethical and epistemic concerns specific to online environments (Christin, 2020) . Meta-ethnographic and reporting guidelines from related fields offer pathways to synthesize ethnographic insights across studies, ensuring clarity and comparability as methods diversify (France et al, 2019).

Online ethnography extends traditional spaces of observation to online habitats, requiring reconceptualization of spaces and interactions (Hallett & Barber, 2013) .

Digital traces and computational analyses contribute to storytelling by revealing patterns not immediately obvious from fieldnotes alone while still foregrounding social meanings (Brooker, 2022; , Christin, 2020) .

6-Ethical and Epistemological Futures of Community Research

The expansion of digital ethnography raises fundamental questions about what remains specifically “ethnographic” in digital research. A key argument is that digital ethnography requires negotiation of the researcher’s self-presentation and co-presence in the field—relational practices that distinguish it from non-participatory digital methods such as content or discourse analysis (Forberg & Schilt, 2023). Long-term, relational data collection, and engagement with community norms and expectations remain central epistemological anchors for defining future ethnographic work online (Lane & Lingel, 2022).

Ethical challenges become especially salient when ethnographers engage stigmatised or vulnerable communities in volatile digital environments, such as dark-web drug-use forums or illicit markets. Research shows that active, multi-sited digital ethnography can complement digital trace analysis but requires careful management of researcher safety, encryption, and legal-ethical obligations (Thompson et al, 2020). Work on vulnerable populations in business and marketing



contexts further highlights the complexities of informed consent, anonymity, and potential harms when community boundaries are porous and data are easily re-identified (Thompson et al., 2020).

These debates suggest that the future of community notions will be shaped by how digital ethnographers handle anonymity, representation, and participation in environments where identities are fluid and platform architectures mediate visibility and risk (Forberg & Schilt, 2023)

For ethnographers, these trajectories imply several practical imperatives. First, research designs must treat platforms and devices not merely as sites but as actors shaping what counts as community and who becomes visible (Caliandro, 2017; Lane & Lingel, 2022). Second, ethical frameworks must adapt to volatile, datafied fields where vulnerability is often opaque and re-identification risks are high (Barratt & Maddox, 2016; Thompson et al., 2020). Third, training in digital literacy, computational tools, and collaborative practices will be essential for sustaining thick description in environments saturated with digital traces (Beneito Montagut et al, 2017; Brooker, 2022).

Online research of communities of inquiry has illustrated the limitations of content analysis in understanding communities in those settings and has revealed the impact of technological use within those communities as a means of creating a sense of belonging through ethnographic study. In this instance, a sense of community encompasses a presence of interaction within a presence of shared understanding. (Johnson, 2021).

Finally, digital ethnography invites scholars to reconceptualize community not as a disappearing object under conditions of digitalization, but as a moving target continually reconfigured by new infrastructures, practices, and struggles over visibility and voice. The future of community notions will be written in close dialogue with the methodological futures of digital ethnography.

7. CONCLUSION

Reconceptualizing community through digital ethnography emphasizes the social texture of online spaces as constitutive of contemporary belonging, identity, and collective action. By foregrounding multimodal data, ethical reflexivity, and cross-space analysis, researchers can articulate how digital life both sustains and redefines community in ways that are inseparable from broader social, political, and cultural contexts. This integrated framework contributes to a more nuanced, rigorous understanding of digital communities and their significance for scholarship and practice in the humanities and social sciences.

Digital ethnography and associated modalities offer insights into how communities are made and remade in the highly digitalized world. Through the combination of qualitative immersion and



computational analysis in digital ethnography and associated modalities, it is possible to develop a deep appreciation and understanding of the complexities of life in the online and offline worlds. Looking ahead at the future of communities from the perspective of digital ethnography: Methodological eclecticism is key. Cross-disciplinary work is also essential. Furthermore, a critical approach is pertinent in digital studies.

Furthermore methodological innovations in ethnographic research, including online/digital ethnography, computational analysis, and team-based research, can thus extend the boundaries of ethnographic research in ways that do not betray the essential characteristics of ethnographic research, such as its commitment to contextual and reflexive research. By combining the qualities of small data studies, the traces of the digital, and the type of team-based, algorithmic-informed research that I will outline below, researchers are able to realize more nuanced and meaningful understandings of the contemporary world.

Digital ethnography invites a fundamental rethinking of community for the digital age. Community can no longer be assumed to be a bounded, place like, or purely face to face entity. Instead, it appears as a mediated, hybrid, and often unsited formation, produced through entangled online and offline practices, platform architectures, and data infrastructures. By combining long term relational immersion with attention to metadata, algorithms, and cross platform flows, digital ethnography provides both the conceptual and methodological tools to theorize community as an ongoing achievement of people and technologies in a digitized world.

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