



Ethnography of Digital Communities: Practices and Methodological Approaches

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Received: 20 / 10 / 2024

Accepted: 12 / 12 / 2024

Published: 31 / 03 / 2025

Abstract:

This paper provides a systematic and epistemological account of the evolution of ethnographic studies, which have historically focused on groups and social systems. Ethnography, as an in-depth qualitative method, has traditionally relied on participant observation to understand human behavior within specific cultural contexts. With the advent of digital technologies and the rise of online communities, digital ethnography has emerged as a powerful tool for studying social phenomena in virtual environments. This study employs participant observation and ethnographic analysis to examine the behaviors and interactions of virtual groups within digital spaces. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on the digital ethnography of online communities.

Keywords: *Ethnographic studies, Digital Communities, participant observation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic method has proven to be an indispensable tool for communication and social studies in the digital age. Unlike quantitative methods, ethnography allows for a more nuanced understanding of human behavior, encompassing a wide range of emotional, behavioral, and communicative activities at various levels, from collective and interpersonal communication to more deviant phenomena such as the reification of humans in virtual spaces, "Quantitative studies have proven insufficient to provide ample opportunities for Scientific research aimed at understanding virtual behavior within digital systems. The diversity and complexity of human phenomena have rendered quantitative research incapable of explaining numerous phenomena associated with the digital environment. (Wahabi, et al., 2024, p. 99)

Quantitative methods have proven inadequate to provide ample opportunities for scientific research aimed at understanding virtual behavior within digital systems. The diversity and complexity of human phenomena have rendered quantitative research incapable of explaining numerous phenomena related to the human condition. (saber, 2024, p. 233), As digital technologies have become deeply integrated into our lives, and as individuals and communities have established a significant presence within digital networks, the limitations of traditional research methods have become increasingly apparent. Descriptive methodologies have struggled to capture the complexity and dynamism of human behavior in digital environments. This has led to a growing recognition of the value of ethnographic research, which provides a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of user experiences, social interactions, and cultural practices within digital contexts. Ethnography typically refers to fieldwork or participant observation, often involving immersion in the lives of the people being studied. Originating from social and cultural anthropology, ethnographic research requires researchers to spend significant time in the field. Ethnographers immerse themselves in the lives of the people they study, seeking to place the phenomena under investigation within their social and cultural context. In essence, ethnography interprets human and communicative phenomena in their authentic context, similar to how the empirical and experimental schools have linked communication phenomena to experience and the hypotheses of behaviorism or the descriptive statistical outputs of phenomena. However, most communication theories explaining the relationship between media and audiences are either behavioral, such as the cultural cultivation theory and the magic bullet theory, or quantitative, relying on statistical interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation.

Therefore, researchers in the United States and Europe have been strongly motivated to shift towards qualitative research methods, particularly ethnography. After years of teaching and practicing quantitative research, they have become convinced that qualitative, and especially ethnographic, methods are better suited to achieving what quantitative research has failed to do. However, we have not observed significant, and perhaps even any, tangible applications of these methods in the Arab world, despite their scientific importance. Ethnography in the Arab world still struggles to establish its identity as a research method within the field of communication studies and to justify its application. Moreover, its teaching in universities remains limited (Mokaawy, 2021, p. 609), It is impossible to contemplate the internet without acknowledging its inherent

cultural and social dimensions. The digital environment has fostered novel patterns of human interaction, regardless of the specific terminology used. Consensus exists that the internet has established a new arena for social engagement. Consequently, new practices have emerged, collectively referred to as "cyberculture". (creeber & Royston, 2009, p. 11),

However, the most striking aspect of digital presence is the reflection of real-world social systems. Individual and institutional practices are mirrored in the digital realm, as are the collective practices of groups, including leadership, support, and behaviors that reinforce group cohesion. These digital communities often replicate the dynamics of physical communities, so that, this present study seeks to explore the phenomenon of virtual communities and to analyze the nature of interactions within these communities through the lens of online ethnography. Specifically, this study aims to address the following research question: What are the salient indicators of affiliation within virtual communities, and what are the methodological implications of conducting ethnographic research in digital contexts?

1. An Overview of Ethnographic studies

Ethnographic studies are a crucial gateway to understanding human life and existence throughout history. This unique discipline combines elements of sociology, history, communication, and humanities. No other field of study, whether in the humanities or sciences, has been as successful in unraveling the complexities of human experience as ethnography.

1.1. The Definition of Ethnography

According to Johnson, ethnography is a narrative endeavor to elucidate the social and cultural dynamics of a particular social system, grounded in meticulous observations of people's everyday practices. (Lourdunathan, 2006, p. 625), Also that Ethnography is a scientific description of a specific culture's customs, beliefs, and behaviors, based on information gathered through fieldwork (Awoniyi, 2014, p. 14)

Many researchers have defined ethnography as the study of people in their natural or original environment – where they live, work, shop, and play. Widely used in fields such as marketing research, ethnography is employed to discover, interpret, and understand the consumer's perspective and the hidden rules of the environment. It provides a holistic view of consumers within the context of their everyday lives. Literally, ethnography means 'a picture of people's lives.

Ethnographic methodology, as proposed by Geertz in 1973, emphasizes the collection of empirical data through firsthand observation and immersion in the field. The discipline relies on tools such as participant observation for observation and analysis (O&A), data collection from diverse sources including surveys, interviews, and documentary analysis via field notes, and the synthesis of data into scientific reports informed by both emic and etic perspectives. (Shaeda, 2014, p. 03), Therefore, we can conclude that Drawing on the theoretical foundations laid by scholars like Miles, Huberman, Malinowski, Booth, and Anderson, ethnography has been established as a robust research methodology. Core to this approach is the detailed observation and description of everyday practices and rituals within various cultures. Ethnographers employ a range of

techniques, including participant observation, individual and group interviews, and document analysis, to gather rich and comprehensive data.

1.1.1 The evolution of ethnography as a field of research.

Gerard Friedrich Müller is credited with developing the concept of ethnography as a distinct discipline during his participation in the Second Kamchatka Expedition (1733-1743) as a professor of history and geography. While on the expedition, he distinguished 'VölkerBeschreibung,' meaning 'description of peoples' in German, as a separate field of study. This concept later became known as ethnography. However, it was August Ludwig von Schlözer and Christoph Wilhelm von Gatterer from the University of Göttingen who introduced the term into academic discourse in an attempt to reform contemporary understandings of world history. Ethnography emerged as a tool in the social sciences, encompassing scientific social observation, observers, written research reports, and the intended audience of the text. There was a hope that the social sciences could acquire a degree of credibility similar to the natural sciences, and the initial approach was akin to the natural sciences in assuming that the researcher had the right to study any phenomenon as long as it led to new knowledge. The scientific method of inquiry into human existence served as a catalyst for establishing this research as a distinct academic field. (Naidoo, 2012, pp. 01-02)

1.1.2 Characteristics of ethnographic studies

One of the core characteristics of the ethnographic method, as highlighted by Wrisberg in his 1986 study, is the expansion of context. This implies that observing behavior within its occurring context is fundamental. Data must be interpreted within the context of the observed situation, and results cannot be generalized to other contexts. Findings must be considered in reference to their specific context. Additionally, Wrisberg and Takman proposed another advantage of the ethnographic approach: a comprehensive vision. This perspective relies on viewing data as a whole to provide a foundation for explaining concrete facts. Unlike other research methods, ethnography does not formulate hypotheses prior to data collection. Instead, hypotheses emerge as data is gathered. The primary goal of the ethnographic approach is to provide a detailed description of the observed situation, which serves as a basis for further analysis (Marliana, 2008, p. 442)

Ethnography views human behavior as being situated within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. As a qualitative methodology, it emphasizes the interpretation of human phenomena through an inductive approach. By avoiding quantification, ethnography focuses on understanding the social meaning of events. Ethnographic methods, including interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and case studies, allow for in-depth data collection and analysis (Adnan Mohammed, 2021, p. 153). According to Gill and Johnson, the ethnographic method is characterized by the following:

- a. Ethnographic research aims to understand human behavior without intentional or unintentional manipulation.
- b. It is conducted in natural settings by studying behavior in its natural context.
- c. It is based on the study of a single case of a small community or specific group.
- d. It examines what actually happens without relying on preconceived opinions or hypotheses.

- e. It relies on the intensive collection of data over an extended period of time.
- f. It employs in-depth interviews and participant observation to collect data and information.
- g. It links data and events to concepts, and derives theories and knowledge from the field.
- h. It connects the findings from the study of specific groups to a broader context. (Gill & Johnson, 2011, p. 74)

1.1.3 Types of Ethnographies

A social phenomenon can be defined as the set of norms and general trends that a society adopts as a foundation for organizing its life and lifestyle. These can manifest as patterns in the relationships between individuals within that society and between its members and others. (Nadhim Jawad, 2019, p. 156), The simple definition of the dynamics of social phenomena highlights the expanding and diversifying nature of ethnographic studies. As the phenomena closely related to humans become more complex and varied, so too do the approaches to their ethnographic investigation. Western and Arab scholars have made significant contributions to this field, Ethnographic studies vary based on a multitude of factors, including the cultural context under investigation, research objectives, employed research techniques, and the specific field and focus of the study, the types of humanistic ethnographies can be summarized as follows:

- a. **Social Ethenography :** Social Ethnography is a qualitative research method that provides a deep understanding of human behavior without the constraint of quantifying and standardizing behavior through numbers and statistics. Social ethnography often focuses on studying interactions and social relationships within human societies, such as power structures, social exchanges, social statuses, cooperation, conflict, and social change. Moreover, social ethnography typically examines phenomena in their contemporary context, exploring social patterns, events, institutions, behaviors, relationships, ideas, and recurring social systems. (Karen & D.soc, 2021, p. 43)
- b. **Organizational Ethenography:** With the dawn of the 21st century, organizational studies have largely abandoned the notion of studying institutions in isolation from social phenomena. Instead, researchers such as Menard, Shirley, and Scott have adopted a new institutional perspective. As Marietta L. Baba argues, institutions, as powerful social actors, are often at the heart of fields that interest social scientists. While commercial organizations were traditionally seen as the primary institutional actors, with the capacity to exert coercive power over individuals, and while state systems could compel institutions, commercial organizations have emerged as ideal social systems and field sites for anthropologists. New institutional theory, particularly as proposed by DiMaggio, offers a novel approach, suggesting that institutions like commercial organizations are social constructions involved in social or cultural production, and the dynamic relationships between them create specific forms of ethnographic practices within these systems. (Marietta L, 2012, p. 21)
- c. **Culture Ethenography:** Ethnography has its roots in anthropology, and throughout its historical development, classical ethnography has focused on describing other

cultures—those outside of the home culture, often considered less developed—in order to understand their beliefs and practices (Jan Drape, 2015, p. 38)

1.2. Ethnography in media and communication studies

Quantitative research has long dominated media audience studies, leaving many behaviors without a truly adequate explanation. In this context, media and communication research has not missed the opportunity to invoke the ethnographic approach after the long-standing methodological and epistemological dominance of quantitative studies, which largely marginalized the importance of the audience (reader, listener, viewer) and their various interactions, orientations, understandings, and interpretations of media content. As a result, it has not provided sufficient information to explain individual behaviors and practices in their own right. (Pasquier & Daniel, 2003, p. 18)

The turn towards ethnographic methods in media and communication research gained momentum in the 1980s, largely influenced by the critical cultural studies movement in Britain. Dissatisfied with the limitations of quantitative approaches, researchers began to explore ethnographic methods to better understand the cultural and social dimensions of media use. The Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture also played a pivotal role in shaping this shift

2. Digital Ethenography

Digital ethnography, or netnography, is grounded in the traditional principles of ethnography, such as participant observation, prolonged engagement with the field, and deep immersion. However, netnography also seeks to understand the cultural contexts within which social interactions occur, spanning both the physical and virtual worlds. By examining the everyday lives of groups and individuals, netnography provides invaluable data for understanding the cultures that emerge within online communities. Consequently, netnography examines virtual worlds as sources, outlets, and platforms for the emergence of cultural practices (Makratar, 2023, p. 11)

Ethnography has evolved alongside the development of communication technologies. With the advent of the internet, Christine Hine argues that the internet itself has become a subject of social scientific inquiry, constituting a cultural phenomenon or a cultural practice within networked worlds. In terms of the cultural form of the internet, the concept of "netiquette" emerges, encompassing emoticons, values, and online laws. In other words, internet cultures are cultural forms that originate online, and these terms all represent cultural forms within the internet ecosystem: virtual world players, webcam girls, hackers, bloggers, and many other groups that significantly shape their self-perception and collective identity through digital media. (Gomez-Cruz & Ardévol, 2014)

2.1 Digital spaces and virtual communities as a research field for the Netnography method

The phenomenon of digital spaces represents a qualitative and profound shift in human communication behavior, brought about by the advent of internet technologies and their various applications. The impact of these spaces has become a central focus of research in the humanities and social sciences, especially given the rapid evolution of services,

applications, networks, and interactive tools that have disrupted traditional patterns of human interaction. Social media networks, as the most prominent product of Web 2.0, have expanded their services beyond mere communication to encompass economic exchanges, promotional activities, alternative social practices, and even advocacy and mobilization efforts. These networks, in all their diversity and ownership structures, form the bedrock of the virtual ecosystem that has given rise to the phenomenon of digital spaces. (Saber, 12-20 april 2022, p. 03) , In her ethnographic study, Hayn suggests that the internet should be analyzed as a cultural product. This implies examining practices that are not necessarily unique to the internet but acquire different dimensions through it. For instance, video production on YouTube.

Digital spaces have brought about a critical shift in the research approach. Studies within our research system have turned towards these spaces, considering them as a parallel or mirrored reflection of human activities in the physical world. Moreover, they have introduced novel phenomena at all levels. This research raises the question of the epistemological and methodological construction of research on digital spaces, and to what extent the humanities and social sciences can withstand this new epistemological and empirical research approach. It also investigates the epistemological specificities of this type of exploratory research.

The roles traditionally played by mass media and the functions they fulfilled within mass communication have undergone a radical transformation, shifting towards interactive communication. This shift is evident in the altered nature of these roles, the evolution of the effects they produce on individuals' perceptions of reality, and the significant role media has long played in shaping political agendas. However, the emergence of interactive communication, characterized by citizen journalism, open networks, virtual communities, and counter-publics, as well as alternative media, electronic political propaganda, and virtual political activism, all point to a fundamental shift away from traditional communication patterns. (Wahabi, et al., 2024, p. 118)

2.2 Ethnographic research tools within digital virtual frameworks.

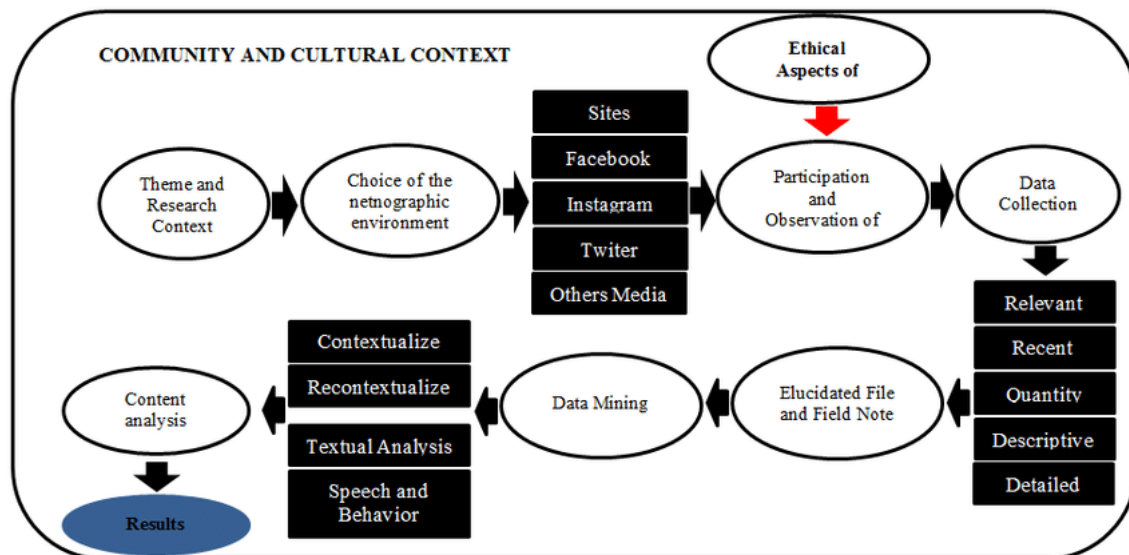
Some researchers use the term "functional intervention" synonymously with participant observation. It can also be referred to as "unstructured observation". Observation, as a core method in social and human research, will be discussed in detail in a dedicated section in previous chapters. However, given its significance in ethnographic research, we will provide a concise overview of participant observation.

Ethnographic research, across disciplines, demands that researchers immerse themselves in the natural settings of the social phenomena they study. To achieve this, researchers must become active members of the community they are investigating. Participant observation, as an investigative technique, allows researchers to experience the everyday lives of their subjects firsthand. (Makkawi, 2021, p. 609), These variations in human practices and the application of methodologies between the physical and virtual realms are rooted in the unique characteristics that distinguish virtual communities.

A virtual community can be characterized as "a group of individuals sharing common interests, unbound by geographical, racial, tribal, political, or religious limitations. They interact through contemporary communication and social media platforms, establishing

their own membership criteria, rules of engagement, and codes of conduct" (Farah, 2014). This definition highlights the unique characteristics of virtual communities, particularly their independence from traditional societal boundaries and their reliance on digital interactions to foster a sense of belonging. (Farah, 2014, p. 138), the form below illustrates some of the technical and methodological characteristics of virtual spaces as research fields.

Form01 : illustrates the composition of the digital environment managed by the netnographic approach.



Source : Netnography: Origins, Foundations, Evolution and Axiological and Methodological Developments and Trends (Morais, Valdeci F, & Carlos A., 2020, p. 446)

According to Polstov and his team, netnography necessitates deep immersion in the field, employing a multifaceted toolkit that prominently features participant observation. The overarching objective is to grasp the intricacies of daily life, as opposed to subjecting individuals to artificial lab settings or examining interactions outside their natural context. Netnography prioritizes comprehending how culture shapes individuals and vice versa, rather than merely isolating social facts within a framework of rigid statistical models and mathematical formulas (Rahmani, 2023, pp. 57-59)

3. Virtual communities as a field of netnographic research

3.1 Motivations for joining virtual communities

The motivations for individuals to join virtual communities vary between the voluntary and the necessary or obligatory, and can be explained as follows:

a. Escaping reality: In virtual communities, there are many unemployed individuals, the disabled, and those marginalized by their real-life communities who seek refuge from their problems and life pressures. Some ask their friends for prayers or advice, others turn to God seeking His help and support, and still others mourn their losses and lament the disappointments and betrayals of others. However, it can be said that not all those who frequent virtual communities are escaping reality; rather, these

communities have become a distinctive destination for those who have become disillusioned with their real world.

b. Religious and linguistic affiliation: Typically, joining online groups is motivated by the same sense of belonging that drives individuals in the physical world. People often gravitate towards groups that align with their existing social identities, subconsciously seeking out communities that reflect their own values and experiences. Common affiliations include religious or linguistic groups, which can facilitate the expansion of shared experiences, as suggested by Wilbur Schramm's model, which emphasizes the importance of a broad common ground for effective communication.

c. Extremism and incitement: Digital environments serve as vast platforms for social interaction and communication, yet they also provide fertile ground for the dissemination of extremist and radical ideas. With the increasing use of social media and the internet in general, it has become easier for individuals and groups to propagate extremist views. The urgent call to join is a significant factor contributing to the success of such ideas, as digital affiliations often hinge on the strength of the group, page, or account, as measured by the number of members and followers.

d. Common interest: A shared interest serves as a compelling impetus for individuals to join virtual communities. When individuals share a common passion or hobby, they experience a strong desire to connect and interact with others who share the same interest. These virtual communities provide a safe and supportive environment for exchanging ideas, experiences, and fostering strong social bonds rooted in this shared interest. Whether it be gaming, reading, art, or any other field, shared interests act as a unifying force among individuals, enhancing their sense of belonging and identity.

e. Interaction and community building: Moreover, internet technology and social media platforms have disrupted linear communication, expanding opportunities for participation, exchange, and mutual control in the communication process. This has been facilitated by the rapid development of interactive tools such as comments, emojis, hashtags, and sharing features. As a result, the once unified digital space has fragmented into numerous virtual communities, each operating independently based on pre-established membership criteria.

f. Solidarity: Solidarity manifests itself in diverse ways within virtual spaces, ranging from participation in awareness campaigns and humanitarian initiatives to providing emotional and psychological support for members. Moreover, collaborative efforts contribute to project completion, knowledge sharing, and the formation of strong interpersonal relationships that transcend geographical boundaries.

3.2 Ethnographic Observation of Phenomena in Digital Spaces

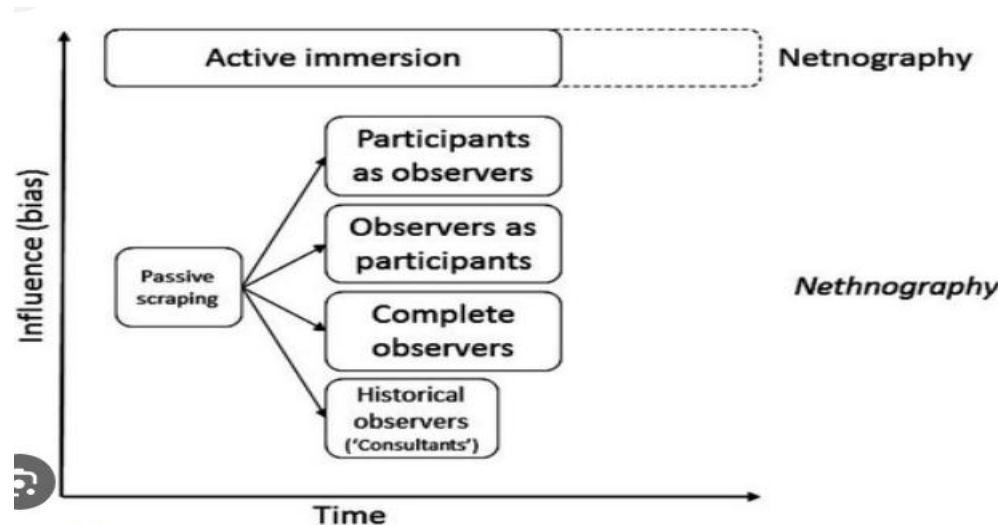
When studying virtual communities, researchers have access to a vast amount of data that can be collected and analyzed. This data typically manifests in virtual spaces in three forms:

- a. Primary data:** Collected directly by the researcher through active participation in the study group.
- b. Recorded data:** Including audio recordings of interactions and the content of digital communications.
- c. Inferred data:** Constructed from the researcher's direct observation of actors' interactions. (Missibah & chacha, 2023, p. 121)

Digital data collection from virtual communities is facilitated by a variety of software applications designed to analyze interactions. Consequently, new research fields such as social computing and digital sociology have emerged. These software programs assist researchers in automating data collection, coding, and visualization. Notable examples include Caqas and Nudixil. (Missibah & chacha, 2023, p. 122)

Participant observation is considered one of the best methods for ethnographic observation of virtual spaces, as illustrated in the figure below :

Form 02 : illustrates the process of observation within the digital environment of netnography



Source : Netnography complementing Netnography :a defensible praxis for the online researcher. (MacCarthy, 2022, p. 3786)

II. Results and discussion :The virtual public sphere exhibits distinct characteristics compared to its traditional counterpart, notably in the following ways:

- a. Redefining public and private boundaries: Social media platforms have evolved into spaces for constructing personal identities and showcasing one's self in the public domain. These platforms allow individuals to glimpse into the private worlds of others, compelling individuals, groups, and institutions alike to re-evaluate their positions within this digital landscape. This process demands a high level of cognitive and social sophistication to effectively navigate and leverage these platforms.
- b. New forms of social action: Social media platforms have enabled marginalized political elites to circumvent the mechanisms of exclusion from the traditional public sphere, which is dominated by the state. These platforms have facilitated the creation of spaces governed by intellectual harmony, where political and cultural content is produced.
- c. The audience in the virtual public sphere has evolved into a content producer. It is no longer a representational space where elites speak on behalf of the masses, as is the case in the elitist public sphere. Instead, users in the virtual public sphere are creators and producers of content that can relate to their personal lives or public affairs.
- d. The rapid pace of technological development in communication products has led to instability in methodologies and epistemologies related to the study of human

interaction and communication behavior within this digital space. With the overwhelming flow of information and the explosion of information sources, ethnographic observation of community contributions remains a challenging endeavor, the accuracy and finality of which cannot be definitively ascertained.

III. Conclusion:

Ethnographic studies have become one of the most effective methods in contemporary research for interpreting human phenomena within digital contexts. Ethnography offers a unique perspective on field research in communication studies, allowing researchers to delve into the intricacies of interpersonal experiences and interactional contexts. Unlike traditional quantitative or qualitative audience studies that focus on statistical analysis or hermeneutic/semiotic interpretations of texts, ethnography provides a more holistic understanding of how digital media shapes and is shaped by social practices. This approach enables researchers to examine the role of digital media in various social spheres and among diverse groups, from adolescents to political activists, and from audiences to media producers and government agencies.

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