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Abstract :

This research paper aims to examine the netnographic approach as a significant qualitative methodology that is recently used in the study of virtual social phenomena. Netnography is regarded as an extension of traditional ethnography, as it uses its foundational concepts and leverages essential methodologies for data collecting in the field, notably participant observation. Nevertheless, it adjusts and refines existing methods to improve their efficacy, integrating and depending on digital technologies at every stage of fieldwork. This analytical flexibility is crucial for examining virtual communities, which fundamentally differ from traditional communities in both form and the conditions imposed on their members.

The research findings suggest that this methodological approach is still in its developmental stage and has not yet achieved complete theoretical and practical sophistication. Despite the obstacles it now encounters in addressing the intricacies of virtual phenomena, it provides a significant and useful contribution to their comprehension. Over time, these obstacles may be alleviated by the ongoing adaptation of traditional principles to the conditions imposed by virtual environment. The creation of innovative conceptual frameworks is crucial for aiding social researchers in organizing their studies and guiding them toward fulfilling both academic and practical goals.

Keywords: Digital Technology, Ethnography, Netnography, Virtual Communities.

الملخص :

يهدف هذا المقال إلى التعرف على المنهج النثنوغرافي باعتباره واحداً من أهم المناهج الكيفية المستخدمة حديثاً في دراسة ظواهر المجتمع الافتراضي، والذي يعتبر كامتداد للمنهج الإثنوغرافي التقليدي، حيث يركز على مبادئه العامة، ويستخدم أهم تقنياته في جمع المعلومات والبيانات من الميدان خاصة الملاحظة بالمشاركة، مع إجراء بعض التعديلات عليها للزيادة من فعاليتها، وتوظيف التكنولوجيات الرقمية والاعتماد عليها في كل مراحل البحث الميداني، بالشكل الذي يمنح المرونة المنهجية اللازمة لدراسة الجماعات الافتراضية التي تختلف اختلافاً جذرياً عن الجماعات التقليدية سواء في تركيبها أو في الشروط التي تفرضها على المنتمين إليها.

وقد توصل البحث إلى أن هذا المنهج لا يزال في مراحل نموه الأولى حيث لم ينضج بعد، لكن، ورغم بعض الصعوبات التي يعاني منها في التعامل مع ظواهر العالم الافتراضي، إلا أنه يساهم مساهمة فعالة في فهمها، حيث يمكن تجاوز تلك الصعوبات مع مرور الوقت عن طريق الاستمرار في تكيف المبادئ التقليدية مع الشروط التي تفرضها البيئة الافتراضية، بالإضافة إلى العمل على بلورة مفاهيم جديدة تساعد الباحثين الاجتماعيين في تأطير بحوثهم وتوجيهها نحو تحقيق الأهداف العلمية والعملية التي تسعى للوصول إليها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإثنوغرافيا، النثنوغرافيا، الجماعات الافتراضية، التكنولوجيا الرقمية.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, human civilization has experienced substantial structural changes propelled by the swift progress in information and communication technologies (ICT) and their extensive incorporation into several facets of everyday life. These advancements have led to many virtual social phenomena arising from heightened digital interactions among persons in multiple cyber domains, distinguished by their forms and contents. Thus, these alterations indicate significant transformations in the social structure and the establishment of new social groups that fundamentally differ from conventional communities. Simultaneously, various conceptual frameworks and terminology have arisen in academic discourse to characterize these ongoing transitions. Certain scholars have introduced the term “network society” to highlight the intricate, extensive relational networks that regulate human interactions beyond traditional temporal and spatial limitations. This new social construction has been termed a “digital society,” emphasizing the profound dependence on digital technologies for economic transactions and social interactions. Conversely, another viewpoint interprets this phenomenon as a “virtual society” that exists autonomously and concurrently with the physical society, though it is frequently considered less substantial or genuine due to its perceived inadequacies in meeting individual or collective needs as effectively as conventional social frameworks.

Despite differences in terminology and classification, a variety of new concerns have arisen in current society that fundamentally differ from conventional social problems. These issues are closely associated with the widespread use of information and communication technology, evident in phenomena such as digital identity difficulties, virtual social engagement, cyber addiction, and online fraud, inter alia. Conventional research paradigms and their corresponding methodological tools exhibit limits in effectively addressing emergent problems compared to their effectiveness with traditional concerns. This has required either the enhancement of current procedures or their replacement with more inventive approaches. Both quantitative and qualitative research frameworks have progressively integrated sophisticated investigative tools, particularly those using digital software for the processing and analysis of large data. Furthermore, scholars have employed diverse non-conventional methodologies to generate rigorous scientific material that effectively tackles the intricacies of modern societal issues.

In this context, the netnographic approach arose in the mid-1990s as a prominent qualitative methodology used by social researchers to examine groups within virtual communities. This methodology employs an array of unique research

techniques and instruments to thoroughly investigate the cyber realm and reveal its concealed dynamics.

In light of the above, the research questions are raised as follows: what are the characteristics of the netnographic approach? What are its differentiating attributes in relation to the conventional ethnographic approach? How researchers use this approach in the investigation of virtual communities? What are the methodological advantages it offers and the potential constraints it may face?

A descriptive-analytical methodology was employed to address these questions by reviewing, analyzing, and critiquing the most notable contributions in this domain. We relied on our personal experiences, either as active agents engaged with the phenomenon under research—using digital technologies daily and connecting with others through them—or as specialist social researchers focused on examining the digital society in its entirety.

2. Virtual communities: A distinct field of study in the social sciences

The advent of virtual communities is intricately connected to the advancement of information and communication technology, especially the Internet, which facilitates remote contact and communication via social media applications. These technologies have eradicated conventional geographical limitations on connection, enabling individuals to converse and discuss on many matters of shared interest, exchanging thoughts and opinions without the necessity of actual acquaintance. This virtual connection has resulted in the formation of various atypical social phenomena concerning solidarity, cooperation, integration, and conflict, among others. These phenomena diverge in essence and composition from conventional social phenomena; yet, they exert effect on reality and are simultaneously shaped by it, notwithstanding their virtual characteristics.

RHEINGOLD defines virtual communities as "communities that emerge from the participation of a sufficient number of individuals in public discourse over an adequate duration, coupled with a requisite level of emotional connection, resulting in the formation of a network of personal relationships in the virtual realm" (RHEINGOLD, 1993, p. 3). Stability is regarded as a crucial need for the establishment of virtual communities. It necessitates extended remote interaction among individuals, allowing them to converse and exchange ideas on diverse subjects of mutual interest. Thus, ephemeral or fleeting interactions do not constitute virtual communities. Furthermore, a sense of belonging is considered

a fundamental trait that arises from the emergence of specific human emotions among the individuals within these communities.

Virtual communities represent contemporary and organized social entities, governed by a set of regulations and normative frameworks that define the roles and actions of individual participants. This regulation continues to exist despite the lack of a centralized body governing interactions, partly due to the widespread use of pseudonymous identities, which are frequently fabricated. These communities have distinct cultural patterns that differentiate them in the virtual realm, granting digital identities to their members. These identities cultivate a sense of loyalty and belonging among members, despite the lack of physical presence and direct interpersonal interaction. These digital identities are fluid and dynamic, growing over time; an individual may have several identities in cyberspace and travel among them to meet unique requirements through interactions with different interlocutors.

Although scholars agree on the emergence of a new form of social interaction in modern societies facilitated by information and communication technologies, opinions diverge regarding the authenticity and effectiveness of virtual communities in relation to the reality. Certain experts assert that virtual communities represent authentic social organizations inextricably linked to reality. They contend that these communities have arisen due to significant technical developments made by human cultures, which satisfy inherent and essential social interaction demands that traditional groupings, dependent on conventional methods, can no longer sufficiently meet. Virtual communities signify the tangible manifestation of a novel historical era in which social interaction shifts from the physical realm to the virtual domain, facilitated by digital technologies. From this perspective, it is essential to reevaluate and reinterpret the notion of social interaction, integrating its virtual aspects and the technological frameworks that facilitate it. RHEINGOLD is a significant proponent of this viewpoint, contending that involvement in virtual communities closely resembles participation in conventional group activities, such as gathering at cafés or joining organizations.

Another perspective, headed by CALHOUN, contends that interactions via digital media, while fulfilling specific social communication needs and arising from the significant ambiguity of the social structure amid rapid technological advancement, are fundamentally imagined interactions. It creates a fabricated sensation of belonging to diverse virtual communities and strengthens limited, sectarian identities. While technology expands communication possibilities beyond the limitations of conventional, closed settings by removing

geographical and temporal barriers, it fails to achieve authentic engagement and cannot serve as a replacement for it. Authentic relationship necessitates immediate and concrete engagement in the physical realm (MOKRETAR, 2023, pp. 9–10).

The examination of virtual communities requires a clear delineation of their boundaries, attributes, and the categories of members engaged. KOZINETS presented various overarching theoretical principles to enhance comprehension of these communities, especially regarding the degree of member engagement. He classified the participants in the following manner KOZINETS (2009, pp. 33–34):

- **Newbies:** Individuals who lack strong social ties within the virtual community and demonstrate relatively low levels of competence compared to other members.
- ✓ **Minglers:** Participants who maintain solid social relationships with several community members but show limited enthusiasm for participating in the community's activities. They tend to exhibit a degree of indifference toward the challenges faced by the group.
- ✓ **Devotees:** These are highly engaged members who actively participate in the community's activities and derive significant personal benefit from their involvement. They possess higher levels of competence than the previous two categories and are particularly keen on leveraging interaction with other members.
- ✓ **Insiders:** Well-connected members who have developed strong social bonds within the community. They are easily identifiable due to their significant influence, in-depth knowledge of the community's activities and dynamics, and their commitment to ensuring the community's cohesion and continuity."

Understanding the distinctions among members is essential for grasping the hierarchical authority structure and socio-electronic configuration of the virtual community. This division facilitates the recognition of each member's social role, their interaction patterns with others, and the degree of their involvement in advancing internal operations. Moreover, it enables the examination of probable sources of conflict and tension among members, along with additional analytical dimensions that may aid the researcher in attaining a deeper comprehension of the topic being studied.

3. From Ethnography to Netnography: An Epistemological Break or a Renewal of a Classical Paradigm?

Given the problems presented by virtual communities that have developed alongside advancements in Internet technologies, conventional qualitative approaches have demonstrated intrinsic limitations in their ability to describe, evaluate, and understand digital social phenomena. This has highlighted the need for using more modern methodological methods that can generate solid knowledge in this field. Netnography, as a contemporary methodological approach, has offered several procedural methods to tackle these issues. Since the mid-1990s, social researchers have effectively employed enetnographic methodologies in various studies, originally utilizing them to investigate digital consumer behavior. The application of netnography has been broadened to examine virtual social phenomena across multiple fields in the humanities and social sciences.

Netnography is a compound term derived from two fundamental words: "Net," referring to everything related to the world of the Internet and digital technologies, especially those used in remote social communication; and "ethnography," which denotes one of the most important traditional qualitative methodologies employed by social scientists and anthropologists such as MALINOWSKI and RADCLIFFE-BROWN in studying the cultures of communities, particularly traditional ones. Netnography primarily relies on participant observation to collect field data concerning these communities, followed by analysis and the provision of an accurate description of their lifestyle and the nature of communication among their members. The researcher focuses on reconstructing meaning through the interpretation of various scenes, interactions, movements, and behaviors according to strict methodological standards, aiming to understand the complex relationships between them and to provide an accurate depiction that reflects the studied phenomenon as it truly is. Ethnography prioritizes revealing the essence of the phenomena over elucidating correlations between variables or testing theories. The researcher's unique expertise is essential in reconfiguring the subject of observation and articulating it as novel information that enhances comprehension.

Netnography is defined as a systematic methodology tailored to examine virtual cultural phenomena arising from interactions among individuals and groups via digital technologies. This approach predominantly depends on fieldwork while ensuring adequate flexibility to adapt to diverse research environments (HINE, 2005, p. 92). Netnography is defined by its unique

emphasis on examining social phenomena in the virtual realm, particularly those arising from interactions among individuals and groups through digital media. Researchers use several research instruments to gather information and data from the field, focusing particularly on digital technologies and the software they offer for monitoring, recording, and storing this information and data for later analysis and interpretation.

Although netnography as a research approach remained largely absent from academic methodological debates until the first decade of this century—marked by the widespread adoption of social media platforms and significant advancements in internet technology—it had in fact been employed earlier, specifically during the 1990s, by several scholars such as STONE and TRUKL, who concentrated particularly on the study of virtual communities and issues related to digital identities. Robert KOZINETS is widely acknowledged for laying the conceptual foundations of netnography as early as 1995, and later, in 2009, for establishing its methodological framework through his seminal publication *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (KOZINETS, 2009). The title itself clearly reflects the close relationship between netnography and ethnography, prompting inquiry into the nature of this connection: Should netnography be considered a subset or an extension of ethnography, or is there an epistemological rupture between them, whereby the former entirely displaces and replaces the latter?

Netnography adheres to the methodological criteria established by ethnography. Both methodologies aim to produce knowledge derived from empirical field data by engaging fully and actively in the activities of the group under investigation over an extended duration. Both necessitate that the researcher exhibit precision in observation, engage in profound thinking, and demonstrate proficiency in the collection of requisite data and information, employing participant observation as a fundamental instrument for data acquisition. The primary distinction between the two is that ethnography concentrates on tangible, geographically and temporally defined groups and cultures, while netnography emphasizes virtual groups and cultures that transcend specific locations, emerging through social media platforms.

Netnography can be considered a subfield of ethnography, applied to the examination of virtual communities by adapting traditional principles and methodologies to the unique conditions of the digital environment, while using advanced information and communication technologies during the

research process. Thus, ethnography serves as the fundamental and guiding framework for this sort of research, as the elimination or substitution of this deeply rooted methodology within social and anthropological studies is unimaginable, provided that physical community endures. The groups that comprise society underpin all sociological interactions, including virtual ones, which inherently cease to exist with the vanishing of concrete physical reality (KAOUKOU, 2023, p. 23).

In academic discussions regarding the intersections of ethnography and netnography, experts have primarily defined the former as "traditional," as is similarly articulated in this research paper. This classification serves solely as a classificatory label intended to confer historical precedence upon ethnography, considering its application for over a century. In contrast, netnography is linked to the emergence and evolution of internet technology during the last thirty years. The netnographic approach is integrated within the ongoing development of the ethnographic approach, so enhancing and supporting it in the examination of modern cultures defined by the interplay between the real and the virtual. This constitutes a novel qualitative methodology integral to social science scholars' endeavors to revitalize a conventional paradigm for framing social research related to the digital virtual domain (KAOUKOU, 2023, pp. 25–26).

KOZINETTS highlighted the intrinsic relationship between ethnography and netnography by delineating the essential prerequisites for the effective implementation of the netnographic approach. The aforementioned conditions can be succinctly encapsulated in the subsequent paragraphs (MOKRETAR, 2023, pp. 13-14):

- ✓ The researcher must integrate the competencies intrinsic to ethnographic inquiry-primarily aimed at deciphering cultural interactions- with the specialized ones necessitated by netnography, which involves the systematic collection and analysis of data within digital environments. Implicit in this condition is the foundational premise that netnography is essentially ethnography adapted to digital contexts. While it necessitates additional proficiencies related to the adept navigation and use of digital technologies for research and communication, it nonetheless remains reliant on classical ethnographic competencies essential for interpreting interpersonal dynamics and deconstructing the socio-electronic fabric of online communities.

- ✓ A profound comprehension of the composition, characteristics, and structural dynamics of virtual communities is imperative. This understanding enables the researcher to effectively tailor and operationalize ethnographic techniques and methodologies in accordance with the specific epistemological and methodological demands of netnographic research.
- ✓ Moreover, the researcher is required to adhere to a rigorously structured research design, articulated through sequential stages, to ensure methodological rigor and structural coherence in netnographic investigations. Ethnographic research paradigms and their associated methodological protocols serve as the principal heuristic framework guiding this process.

4. Stages of Netnographic Research:

While netnography is fundamentally based on the same methodological principles as traditional ethnographic research, it diverges in numerous critical respects including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This disparity mostly arises from the virtual characteristics of research subjects and the methodologies used. Although fieldwork in digital environments is akin to that performed in physical locations, it is the online research context that essentially differentiates the two (BRANTHONNE & WALDISPUEHL, 2019, pp. 7–8). KOZINETs delineates five fundamental stages of netnographic research, shown in the following table:

Table 1: Stages of Netnographic Research

Stage	Description
First Stage	Identifying the research problem, in addition to the social contexts or topics where research is conducted.
Second Stage	Defining and selecting the research population or the targeted group.
Third Stage	Observation and participation in data collection, while adhering to ethical procedures.
Fourth Stage	Analyzing data and interpreting the results iteratively.
Fifth Stage	Writing and presenting the research findings along with theoretical and/or policy implications.

Source: (KOZINETs, 2009)

4.1. First Stage:

Like any scientific research, netnographic inquiry seeks to address one or more questions that represent a distinct and precise issue. The researcher must clearly express these questions after identifying the problem, guaranteeing alignment with the study's direction. The issues requiring the netnographic approach are inherently associated with virtual surroundings rather than physical ones. Consequently, the initial stage must concentrate on delineating the characteristics of this digital domain. This generally encompasses online communicative environments, interactive platforms, chat rooms, discussion forums, blogs, etc. It is imperative to delineate the study's dimensions and variables, the attributes of the participants, and to choose a suitable approach for accessing the online community under examination (MOKRETAR, 2023).

4.2. Second Stage:

At this stage, the netnographer concentrates on accurately delineating the research community through the collection, analysis, and comparison of data regarding diverse virtual communities. The researcher ultimately chooses the group with the highest number of individuals, focusing on the interactive aspect and the degree of members' participation in various activities. The chosen group must demonstrate relative stability and pertinent qualities to guarantee that the selected community yields the most comprehensive data and information necessary for the research (RBAHI & BOUDJEMAA, 2020, pp. 577–578).

4.3. Third Stage:

Upon selecting the research community, the netnographer immerses himself, participating in many activities and connecting with other members until they integrate into the investigated group. This degree of integration enables the researcher to gather all requisite data during the third phase, employing all instruments afforded by digital technologies for recording and storage. Participation in virtual communities is typically more accessible than in traditional physical communities due to digital technologies that remove various barriers, including the necessity for formal authorization, long-distance travel, pre-existing social connections, and access negotiations (BERNARD, 2003, p. 09). The researcher may sometimes withdraw and thereafter return to investigate particular facets of interaction among the group's members. KOZINETZ emphasizes a series of ethical norms that must be observed throughout direct connection and participation in group activities.

4.4. Fourth Stage:

Concurrent with data gathering and preliminary analysis, the netnographer embarks on a fourth stage that entails a more profound study, subsequent to the categorization and arrangement of the gathered content. At this stage, the researcher analyzes communications, texts, and digital posts, exploring interaction processes to get further data on areas of the study that are ambiguous. This step is crucial, requiring the researcher to exert considerable effort to evaluate and comprehend meanings without the broader context of diverse virtual activities, primarily due to the scant information regarding the research participants. To address this difficulty and preserve the structural integrity of the research process, the researcher uses overarching theoretical notions.

4.5. Fifth Stage:

In the fifth and concluding stage, the netnographer disseminates the study's findings. At this juncture, it is feasible to interact with research participants to disseminate the findings and solicit their feedback—an imperative measure to guarantee transparency (RBAHI & BOUDJEMAA, 2020, p. 579). The researcher must reveal their genuine identity and elucidate the study's objectives to the participants (MOKRETAR, 2023, p. 15). Furthermore, it is essential to secure participants' agreement prior to disseminating their statements or any content generated from their online activity (BERNARD, 2003, p. 11). All of these research endeavors are executed remotely, eliminating the necessity for in-person interaction, which is characteristic of conventional ethnographic research.

5. Specificities of Applying the Netnographic approach: Between Available Opportunities and Procedural Constraints

From the outset, we emphasized that effective use of the ethnographic approach necessitates the researcher's profound immersion to comprehend the subject matter through complete involvement in the group's activities, coupled with significant effort to interpret the data acquired via participant observation. While the research community supports this process due to its tangible nature and direct opportunities for ethnographic engagement with members in the field, the scenario varies in netnography, which emphasizes the examination of virtual communities. As a result, in-person meetings and interactions with participants become unfeasible, adversely impacting certain methodological procedures,

despite the myriad benefits offered by digital technology, especially in terms of information abundance and analytical precision.

In this context, “KAOUKOU” identified five procedural challenges within the netnographic approach that may hinder its efficacy in attaining the methodological objectives often prioritized in ethnography. The difficulties include intermittent involvement or immersion, digital exposure, the assumed participant, digitally applied interpretation, and informational flow (KAOUKOU, 2023, pp. 25-39).

5.1. Intermittent Immersion and the Netnographer's Balancing Act Between Physical and Virtual Environments:

Netnography uses participant observation as the principal method for gathering field data. This necessitates the researcher's complete engagement in the virtual community and active involvement in all its activities. Although such immersion is attainable in conventional ethnographic studies, it becomes far more difficult in modern netnographic research for two primary reasons:

- ✓ "The first reason relates to the researchers, who find themselves compelled to navigate between two distinct environments. The first is the physical environment in which they live, where they must respond to the conditions it imposes in terms of meeting their needs and fulfilling obligations toward actors in their immediate surroundings. The second is the virtual environment, where the researchers are required to immerse themselves as part of the empirical implementation of the methodological principles dictated by participant observation. As a result, the researchers are constantly shifting—withdrawn from one environment and engaged in the other."
- ✓ The second reason relates to the netnographic subject, that may at any moment withdraw from the virtual community and engage with other groups within cyberspace or shift toward the physical world. In fact, the virtual activity of the community itself may come to a complete halt at certain times. Consequently, the researchers may be compelled to suspend and postpone their research activities until the virtual engagement of the community resumes.

In all instances, the researcher persistently navigates between the two environments, as the distinctions between them remain fairly indistinct. The researcher must consider this dimension to reconcile the dual commitments

(BESSIS & KADDI, 2022, p. 88). The main topic in this context pertains to the degree to which intermittent immersion influences the efficacy of participant observation as a method for gathering data from the virtual research community.

Contemporary netnography fundamentally depends on digital technologies, especially for recording, storing, and archiving processes. These technologies act as substitutes for the researchers when they are not present in the virtual field. Upon return, the researchers can examine numerous facts they may have overlooked. Indeed, absence and withdrawal may be deliberate—employed deliberately by the researchers to attain particular study goals. From this viewpoint, it is contended that intermittent immersion, despite its difficulties—particularly the withdrawal from the virtual research community—can still provide numerous benefits due to digital technology (KAOUKOU, 2023, pp. 28–29). In contrast to conventional ethnographic studies that necessitate constant immersion in the community, netnography provides researchers with enhanced flexibility, allowing them to disengage and re-engage without overlooking critical occurrences, which are frequently documented and available for later review.

The netnographic approach is not limited to participant observation; it includes various methodological tools such as direct observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, in-depth dialogues, and narratives. Furthermore, it involves the acquisition of tangible artifacts created by persons, like films, videos, and photographs, among others (BOUDJAFJOUF, 2022, p. 284). The use of these methodological tools requires specific procedural adjustments when implemented in the context of digital research.

5.2. The Dilemma of Digital Exposure in Netnographic Research:

Exposure pertains to the degree to which the researched individual either conceals or discloses information and data concerning their identity in the digital realm, together with the reliability of the information they present and their openness or reticence regarding distant perspectives. The netnographic approach has seen numerous objections due to the lack of the study subject's identification, which might lead to the disclosure of extensive material that may not accurately represent their genuine views on the addressed problems. They may address specific issues while omitting others, or refrain from discussing particular subjects to avert possible adverse outcomes. BAILY diminishes the significance of netnographic research outputs and the observations it depends on, as it overlooks face-to-face encounters. SPITULNIK deems the netnographic approach inadequate because it precludes the researcher from witnessing the

subject's body language, including smiles, variations in facial color, and indicators of uneasiness during encounters, among others (SATVEER & MOHAN, 2017). The researcher's endeavors are consequently confined to analyzing and interpreting the signals and symbols employed in communication, lacking direct insight into the individual operating behind the used apparatus.

Given the challenges inherent in netnographic research stemming from a lack of openness, the researcher must spend more effort in interpreting meanings and analyzing data gathered from the internet research community. Any neglect in this matter may result in inaccuracies, ultimately compromising the validity of the acquired data.

In addressing this critique, KAOUKOU contends that there is an overemphasis on the adverse facets of netnographic research, asserting that the majority of the criticisms documented in this context stem from a reductionist viewpoint that is disconnected from the genuine practical implementation of this approach in the field for two primary reasons (KAOUKOU, 2023, pp. 31-33):

- ✓ Remote communication is not confined merely to text messages and the use of electronic icons; rather, owing to advancements in digital technologies, synchronous interactions via audio-visual means, such as live streaming, have become feasible. This development allows for the preservation of a minimal degree of body language.
- ✓ The anonymization of personal information affords respondents the opportunity to engage with numerous issues and to disclose viewpoints that they might otherwise withhold if their identity were known. Empirically, there exists an inverse correlation between the extent of personal data disclosure and the comprehensiveness and integrity of the information provided by respondents. Specifically, the greater the concealment of one's identity, the more forthright the individual tends to be in engaging and discussing topics within the virtual environment, and conversely. In other words, the degree of freedom experienced by respondents in virtual spaces, when their identities are concealed, enhances the credibility of digital content, as it more authentically reflects their personal experiences, free from the social pressures potentially exerted by the researcher's inquiries or the exposure of their known identity.

5.3. Constraints Related to the Presumed Research Participants:

In netnographic research, the researcher typically interacts with a group of participants who are unfamiliar and with whom no prior communication has been formed to prepare them for the study. This scenario presents multiple ethical dilemmas. Zimmer (2010, pp. 313-325) examines many research concerns related to the protection of participants' privacy, the revelation of their names, the security of their data, and the imperative of obtaining their consent before publishing their statements. These obstacles are easily alleviated in traditional ethnographic research, which include direct interaction and participation between the researcher and the participants.

The constraints concerning the virtual research topic encompass not only ethical considerations but also research methodologies and the dependability of results. Engaging in comprehensive data collecting from the digital community is challenging due to geographical separation, emotional detachment between the researcher and participant, and the lack of contextual factors that influence individuals' interactions in the virtual realm. Certain obstacles may be mitigated through the implementation of e-interviews with participants selected by the researcher based on observations during interaction processes (KAOUKOU, 2023, pp. 33–34). Nonetheless, the researcher may face considerable challenges in convincing certain subjects and establishing their trust while remaining behind the used apparatus.

Certain researchers have expressly advocated for the amalgamation of netnographic and classic ethnographic methodologies to address the issues posed by digital research subjects and their interactions. This entails broadening the study's scope beyond its solely cyber environment and emphasizing the real-world and social backgrounds of the participants. It also involves making efforts to meet them in person and analyzing the intricate relationships between digital and physical places, with the objective of attaining a more profound comprehension of the studied phenomenon. Indeed, this is classified as "encompassing netnography" (KHELALFA, 2022, pp. 96-100).

5.4. The Trap of Over-Interpretation:

The netnographer frequently encounters an excessive volume of digital information and data resulting from the vigorous and dynamic interactions among participants in the virtual examined community. The profusion and incessant stream of information may result in over-interpretation, either due to reductionism intended for comprehension and elucidation, or through undue

attempts to establish coherence. This over-interpretation may lead the research trajectory to diverge from lived reality, especially when a general context for socio-digital action is lacking and the researcher, whether deliberately or inadvertently, overlooks the social and cultural background of the participants (KAOUKOU, 2023, pp. 34–36). To resolve this challenge, the researcher must allocate considerable time and effort to sorting, analyzing, and comparing the data to ascertain its sources and purposes prior to interpretation.

Aiming to handle the issue of over-interpretation and achieving more rational and credible interpretations in netnographic research, BERNARD suggested a series of guidelines grounded in two concepts derived from the hermeneutic tradition: the hermeneutic circle and the fusion of horizons (BERNARD, 2003, p. 12):

- ✓ The meaning of the whole within the hermeneutic circle is determined by the individual elements that constitute it, which are, in turn, understood by situating them within the context of the whole. Thus, interpretation necessitates a continuous movement between the whole and its parts, and vice versa. In netnography, this circular relationship is reflected in the repeated examination of communicative acts, understood in a manner that differs from the sum of individual actions involved in the overall interactive process. The goal of the hermeneutic circle, in this context, is to produce a coherent understanding free of contradictions. This involves the researcher reading all the data to preserve the general meaning, then working to identify similarities and differences among the various elements. It is important to note, however, that the search for similarities to grasp the overarching meaning does not imply ignoring the differences between the positions of the research participants involved in the interaction.
- ✓ The shift from the whole to the details, or vice versa, through the hermeneutic circle helps us understand the culture of the studied group and discover its components (such as traditions, norms, and deeply rooted concepts shaped by the language of communication). In this process, some themes are gathered while others are left out, and the researcher's level of abstraction increases until the study's focus is clearly defined and limited. This is known as the fusion of horizons (ARNOLD & FISCHER, 1994, pp. 55-70). In other words, applying the principles of the hermeneutic approach in digital research through netnographic approach helps protect the researcher from over-interpretation.

5.5. Constraints Associated with Limiting the Scope of Observation Due to the Flow of Information:

Researchers applying the netnographic approach encounter significant obstacles in accurately capturing the extensive information and data generated by the continual interactions within the virtual study community. These issues are intensified by the fluidity of the digital environment, which operates as an unstable interactive framework that continually transforms due to the abrupt exit of certain participants and the unforeseen arrival of others. To eliminate randomness, the netnographer must constrain the observation timeframe and meticulously organize data gathering sessions, assuring accurate recording with suitable digital technologies to avert data loss. This is particularly crucial due to the structural changes taking place within the virtual group under examination, rendering archiving a paramount problem for researchers in this domain (KAOUKOU, 2023, pp. 36-38). The observation period may be prolonged to account for time lost due to the researcher's withdrawal or disruptions in the group's virtual engagement (BESSIS & KADDI, 2022, p. 93). The primary purpose is to guarantee the thorough collection of all requisite facts and data to completely comprehend the phenomenon under investigation.

From the onset of the research, field note-taking must be consistently done in the format of a research journal, memos, and diverse explanatory comments, among others. The notes are subsequently gathered and analyzed to enhance the processes of analysis and interpretation (BERNARD, 2003, p. 55). Note-taking enables the assessment of whether the acquired information sufficiently elucidates the phenomenon under research.

6. Conclusion:

The netnographic approach is a contemporary qualitative methodology used in the examination of virtual communities. It signifies extensive paradigmatic transformations in the humanities and social sciences in recent decades, mostly propelled by technological breakthroughs, especially in digital technologies. This approach does not represent a fundamental epistemic shift from the established methodological traditions of these disciplines; instead, it is grounded in the underlying ideas of classical ethnography, which has been essential to sociological and anthropological research for more than a century. It follows standard procedural protocols and can be seen as an enhancement of classic ethnographic techniques, supplemented with advanced research instruments. Thus, this continuity enhances its methodological importance, and it provides substantial flexibility for a thorough comprehension of the cyber domain in all its facets, overcoming the limitations of conventional ethnographic approach when applied to modern digital social phenomena.

The netnographic approach is still undeveloped due to its relative freshness and faces various procedural problems during fieldwork because of the virtual aspect of the studied phenomena. As a result, it has faced considerable criticism since its beginnings, mainly over the lack of socio-electronic context in digital social actions. Furthermore, challenges emerge from the netnographer's engagement with and assimilation into the research community. Many scholars employing this approach propose that these issues might be mitigated by the deliberate implementation of digital technologies, optimizing their efficacy within the research process. Applying this approach necessitates significant alterations to field processes, as well as the integration of novel and varied theoretical frameworks designed for digital research. It is no longer feasible to examine virtual social phenomena using the approaches and concepts designed for traditional communities without adequately considering the intrinsic distinctions between these contexts.

Despite the reluctance of numerous social science experts to embrace the **netnographic approach**—stemming from their disconnection from the digital realm, unfamiliarity with its complexities, insufficient technical proficiency, or skepticism regarding its methodological tools—the swift evolution of digital technologies and their increasing use, particularly among younger researchers, coupled with the rise of various social issues linked to the virtual realm, will inevitably necessitate their reliance on this approach, foster its advancement, and confront its shortcomings in the near future.

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