

The Evolving Ethics of Digital Ethnography: Adapting Traditional Methods to Digital Spaces

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Abstract

Digital ethnography, an evolving methodological approach, adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of online communities and digital environments. This article critically examines these ethical challenges by engaging with existing ethical frameworks established by academic associations such as the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), the British Sociological Association (BSA), and the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). It explores key methodological considerations, including the role of researcher presence, ethical reflexivity, and the shifting nature of consent in digital spaces. The study argues that rigid, prescriptive ethical guidelines often fail to capture the nuances of digital research, necessitating a flexible, situational approach that prioritizes participant agency and contextual ethics. By analyzing emerging best practices and ethical concerns through case studies and interdisciplinary literature, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on ethical digital ethnography.

Keywords: Digital ethnography, ethics, informed consent, anonymity, internet research guidelines, public-private boundaries, researcher reflexivity

Introduction

Digital ethnography, often referred to as netnography, virtual ethnography, or online ethnography, is a methodological approach that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of digital environments and online communities (Murthy 2008). This approach allows researchers to immerse themselves in digital contexts, capturing the dynamics of these spaces and the experiences of their inhabitants. Underberg and Zorn (2013) define digital ethnography as a method for representing real-life cultures through storytelling in digital media. Their work highlights the interdisciplinary nature of digital ethnography, drawing on insights from cultural anthropology, folklore, digital humanities, and digital heritage studies. Educational applications of digital ethnography are explored by Antoniadou and Dooly (2017), who describe it as a

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