Title: **Virtual Societies between Ethnographic Studies Online and Netnographic Research – A Study on Conceptual Boundaries and Terminological Localization**

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 Abstract

The study of societies has attracted significant interest from scholars across disciplines, driven by the need to identify societal challenges, analyze social phenomena, and understand the diverse practices that distinguish one society from another. Qualitative research, particularly through ethnography, has proven effective in offering scientifically grounded insights into social structures and behaviors. With the rise of digital technologies and social networking platforms connecting millions globally, traditional social interactions have increasingly shifted to digital environments shaped by unique technological features. This shift necessitates a reexamination of qualitative methods to study these emerging virtual societies. This study explores the complex relationship between qualitative research methodologies and the investigation of online communities. It seeks to clarify and refine key concepts—such as virtual ethnography, netnography, and virtual societies—by addressing the central research question: What are the conceptual and methodological boundaries between online ethnography and netnography in studying societies within digital spaces?

Keywords: Digital Spaces, Virtual Societies, Online Ethnography, Netnography, Terminology Localization.

Introduction

The social transformations driven by advancements in communication technologies across various aspects of societal life have become a central focus of research. Each technological revolution in communication media is accompanied by scholarly analyses of its implications and impact on human society. The emergence of new communication platforms has underscored the integration of virtual spaces—products of these technological innovations—into the daily social and cultural realities of individuals and communities.

Today, virtual spaces constitute a societal framework that, in many ways, mirrors real-world society. These digital environments facilitate diverse forms of communication through new media, creating a semi-parallel reality that individuals engage with daily. However, this virtual realm cannot be entirely disentangled from reality, as it remains intricately connected to it. Just as in the physical world, virtual spaces host individuals and groups, shifting communication processes into a different dimension—one that encapsulates human life in all its political, economic, social, and cultural aspects while leveraging distinctive communicative functions. Consequently, it has become essential to examine the various modes of communication within virtual societies to analyze their emerging communicative phenomena.

The ethnographic approach is a qualitative research methodology that has produced precise and scientifically rigorous insights into the study of real-world societies. As human societies have transitioned from physical to digital spaces, the ethnographic method and its research tools have evolved accordingly, leading to the development of virtual ethnography (or online ethnography) and netnography. Despite this adaptation to the digital environment, these methodological approaches continue to prompt scholarly debate among researchers in media and communication studies. Key discussions revolve around their applicability in media communication research and the methodological procedures best suited for analyzing virtual societies that have emerged within these digital spaces.

To address the research problem, this study aims to clarify and refine complex and interrelated concepts by examining, analyzing, and synthesizing them. It does so by posing the following sub-questions:

– What are the defining characteristics and classifications of virtual societies?

– What constitutes online ethnography, and under what conditions can a study be classified as online ethnographic research?

– What is netnography? When can research be classified as a netnographic study?

– How can research methodologies be adapted to suit the specific characteristics of the virtual society under investigation?

To address these questions, we begin by defining the general meaning of each concept while highlighting the rationale for preferring one term over another. This study provides precise terminological definitions for these interrelated concepts and explores the nuances introduced by their evolving scientific designations. Additionally, it examines the various contexts that necessitate the appropriate use of specific terms, ensuring conceptual accuracy and methodological clarity.

I. Virtual Societies Terminologically

The term "virtual societies" was first introduced by Howard Rheingold in his book *The Virtual Community*. He asserted:

"What people need is an opportunity to establish relationships with their neighbors living in distant parts of the global village, even through the internet" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 75).

By emphasizing the human need for communication, Rheingold underscored the concept of neighborliness despite geographical distances. This notion aligns with McLuhan's idea of the global village, which suggests that technological advancements have transformed the world into an interconnected community, transcending physical boundaries.

Virtual societies are communities of individuals who interact via the internet using computers to engage in discussions on various topics. As (Valtersson, 2019, p. 33) states, *"They are actual societies where individuals maintain organized contact with one another, formed virtually by people with shared interests."*

These digital societies inherit numerous cultural elements from the physical societies they originate

from. Many sociologists have explored the evolution of social entities on the internet, emphasizing how virtual spaces have facilitated the emergence of digital communities where individuals interact and communicate (Saleh, 2002, p. 27).

Ali Rahuma, in his book *Automated Sociology*, states:

"The social phenomenon, encompassing its cultural, technical, behavioral, economic, political, and legal dimensions, has shifted from being naturally represented within human society to an industrialized representation—symbolic, digital, and mechanical. In its original form, it has been transformed into an electronic manifestation" (Rahuma, 2008, p. 23).

Rahuma suggests that social life has undergone an initial transition from physical reality to virtual spaces, driven by modern communication technologies.

Munir Hijab defines virtual societies as *"a society consisting of geographically distant individuals who communicate and connect through electronic networks, creating a sense of loyalty and participation among them as a result"* (Hijab, 2004, p. 47).

They are also defined as groups that emerge through the internet, where users can interact, engage in discussions, and develop collective awareness and personal relationships within virtual spaces (Youness, 2012, p. 09).

Modern information and communication technologies, along with new media, have provided users with a communicative space that transcends temporal and spatial limitations. These technological advancements have overcome the inherent constraints of time and space in the communication process. Through the creation of virtual worlds, technology has shifted aspects of human life from real-world contexts to digital environments, integrating all dimensions of human interaction and communication.

The modern technological communication environment, in which individuals now exist virtually, has integrated various technological mediums previously known to humanity. The internet, as an electronic communication medium, converges multiple forms of communication simultaneously, reshaping social phenomena—including their behavioral, cultural, economic, political, and technical dimensions—from natural human society into

an environment where they are represented symbolically, digitally, and mechanically. As a result, social life has become increasingly digitalized, with remote communication via the internet surpassing traditional face-to-face interactions.

The communication technologies that have facilitated the creation of virtual spaces where individuals interact have evolved beyond mere tools and mechanisms. They have profoundly influenced users' attitudes, behaviors, and cognitive and perceptual frameworks.

Virtual societies share certain characteristics with physical societies while also exhibiting distinct features shaped by the digital environments in which they exist. The virtual space has transformed into a public domain, fostering communication and interaction among users through various technological platforms. Virtual societies can be defined as the relationships that emerge among users of online forums and chat rooms who share common interests, values, and objectives (Ibrahim, 2010, p. 04).

I. 1 Types of Virtual Societies
I. 1.1 Virtually Born Societies

These are communities that originate entirely within the virtual space, formed solely through their engagement with a specific social media platform (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) and their shared interests. Members of these societies interact exclusively online, without any real-world societal connections. Examples include fan communities dedicated to a particular football team or global enthusiasts of a specific sport.

I .1.2 Societies Transitioning from Reality

These virtual societies originate in the physical world but extend into the digital realm. While they maintain the fundamental characteristics of traditional human societies, they migrate to virtual spaces to leverage the benefits of digital communication and adapt to its unique dynamics. These communities transfer their cultural heritage from reality to the virtual domain, using it as a platform to preserve, showcase, and share their traditions with a broader audience.

An example of such societies is minority communities that use virtual spaces to express and preserve their cultural identity. These communities share common traits rooted in reality, such as

ethnic heritage, language, religion, geography, and history, yet they convene online to discuss critical issues and seek solutions to their daily challenges. Their primary objective is to highlight and promote their cultural identity, including customs, traditions, and heritage, which distinguish them from others. The virtual space provides them with the freedom to express their views without the barriers and restrictions often encountered in the physical world.

For such communities, the virtual space functions as a socio-cultural technological system, extending beyond mere digital interactions. Their existence is not dependent on digital devices; rather, their real-world identity and cultural ties endure, ensuring the continuity of intellectual and spiritual communication among members. The virtual space serves as a critical platform for these communities to engage in discussions on cultural, political, and economic issues, facilitating dialogue and preserving their collective identity in a digitally connected world.

As (Fawziya & Hanan, 2016, p. 53) state:

"The social development of a community relies on the significance of its sub-systems and their prioritization within the theory of mechanical formation, as well as the role of individuals as sub-systems in shaping the structure and evolution of the community. This process parallels the simulation of computer-based development (as a mechanical technological system) in relation to social development."

I .2 Key Characteristics of Virtual Societies
I .2.1 A Socio-Technological System

− Awareness of digital membership and collective digital identity, where individuals recognize their participation in a shared virtual space.
− The ability of individuals to organize and contribute to the system's norms and rules, shaping the dynamics of the virtual community.
− The possibility of using pseudonyms or aliases, including names of famous individuals, allowing for anonymity or alternative identities.
− A social network of individuals interacting through modern technological means, overcoming geographical limitations and fostering global connectivity.

− A portal for interactions beyond local real-world communities.
− Heterogeneity among members in age, education, occupation, social, and economic status.
− The potential to build virtual relationships with individuals of different nationalities.
− The use of a communicative language based on symbols and icons.
− Information availability for all.
− As individuals deepen their virtual engagement, they increasingly disconnect from real-world societies.
− Members' goals range from specific projects, which conclude upon completion, to sharing personal experiences and discussing particular topics.
− Challenges in studying these societies due to their vast and diverse memberships and the difficulty of verifying real identities.

II. Ethnography
Ethnography is the analytical study of contemporary ethnic groups, focusing on their cultural and social dimensions. This is conducted through direct observation and documentation of cultural materials from the field, as well as the description of cultural practices as they manifest. Ethnography involves detailed studies of lifestyles, traditions, and heritage unique to specific ethnic groups (Rahuma, 2008, p. 160). It examines human communities characterized by shared social, economic, and cultural structures, where unity is established through a common language and cultural identity.

Ethnography has been recognized as a research method with a history spanning over a century. It originated in the Western world as a means of studying distinct and distant cultures that could not be comprehended through superficial analyses or brief interactions (Gobo, 2014, p. 22). Consequently, ethnography continues to gain prominence in social research broadly and in media and communication studies specifically.

The American anthropologist Ogbu (1939–2003) defines ethnography as a method for understanding a community's lifestyle and daily practices by examining the ideas, beliefs, values, behaviors, and objects its members engage with. This is achieved

through participant observation within the natural context of the group's life (Ogbu, 1996, p. 371).

The ethnographic methodology emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It evolved as a distinct field of study, having separated in the first half of the 19th century from anthropology, which focuses on the study of humans and their cultures. Ethnography gradually developed through the contributions of scholars such as Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942) from Poland and British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). Ethnographic anthropology assimilated the intellectual and cultural climate of its time, establishing itself as a natural science of society (Gobo, 2014, p. 34).

Based on the above, ethnography is a research method dedicated to studying communities, groups, or minorities. It enables researchers to engage in the daily lives of the studied community for a sufficient period to collect data on their culture, beliefs, and heritage. The primary goal is to document how these elements shape everyday life and social relationships. Ethnography extends beyond merely describing behaviors; it also involves analyzing and interpreting the culture from within, offering an in-depth understanding of its dynamics and meanings.

As (Oreily, 2005, p. 24) states, ethnography is an approach that focuses on understanding behavior within a social context through the active participation of the researcher in the studied field. It produces a descriptive report based on distinctive research tools, such as informal interviews and participant observation.

Ethnography's significance in research stems from the limitations of other methodologies in effectively studying human and social phenomena, particularly in media and communication research. Its immersive and participatory nature allows for a deeper understanding of social interactions and cultural dynamics that other approaches may fail to capture.

II .1 Online Ethnography

Online ethnography, also referred to as cyber ethnography or virtual ethnography, is the ethnographic study of social media users and online communities. It is employed to examine communities that emerge through the internet. The unit of analysis can be either individuals or groups, with all observations and interviews conducted online through specific websites to collect qualitative data on individuals, groups, and their cultures (Zaki, 2012, p. 13).

Among the various terms, "virtual ethnography" is the most suitable for describing ethnographic research on virtual societies, as it aligns with the virtual nature of the studied community. There is no equivalent term, such as "cyber society" or "online society," to describe communities formed exclusively on the internet.

The distinct feature of virtual ethnography is the researcher's ability to deeply engage with participants across different virtual spaces for varying durations, recording observations of users' communicative behaviors within these environments (Mantzoukas, 2010, p. 422).

The dominance of digital media, driven by advanced technological innovations, has expanded and reinforced virtual societies since the 1990s. It has also transformed patterns of social interaction and relationships between individuals and groups (Ali, 2020, p. 13).

Sociologist Serge Proulx emphasizes that adopting virtual ethnography to study the use of communication technologies and the internet enables ethnographic researchers to interpret user interactions, uncovering specific meanings derived from user self-expression (Proulx, 2011, p. 06).

Virtual ethnography requires the researcher to adopt a holistic view of communicative relationships among users, analyzing their interactions, messages, and responses through new media. This is accomplished by recording observations for subsequent analysis. The primary objective is to scientifically study culture in action, regardless of whether the studied domain is real or virtual (Friedenberg, 2019, p. 11).

Virtual ethnography integrates socio-cultural and technical factors, enabling the identification of cultural distinctions between societies. It also differentiates communicative behaviors across various communities and examines the impact of relationships on cultural exchanges, considering factors such as time, space, and both verbal and non-verbal interactions (Amina, 2018, p. 123).

III. Netnography

Netnography is a contemporary form of ethnography tailored for the study of virtual societies. It

adapts ethnographic research tools to suit media and communication studies in the digital environment. The term "netnography" is derived from the words "net" and "graphy," referring to the study of individual behaviors, interactions, and practices within digital spaces, employing ethnographic-derived tools and methodologies.

Netnography is rooted in the principles of traditional ethnography, emphasizing description and utilizing methods such as observation and virtual interviews. Despite variations in terminology—such as digital ethnography, virtual ethnography, network ethnography, and internet ethnography—all share the common feature of conducting virtual fieldwork and immersing the researcher in the studied community.

However, netnography distinguishes itself by replacing the prefix "ethno" with "net." The term "ethno" typically refers to ethnic or cultural minorities, a central element of traditional ethnographic terminology, even in digital contexts. By substituting "ethno" with "net," netnography specifically highlights the digital environment and denotes a methodological approach for studying virtual societies that lack physical or cultural connections to the real world.

For instance, studying a global community of online gamers (e.g., PUBG players) serves as an example of netnographic research. Members of such a community typically do not know each other in the real world but interact through their roles in the game on digital platforms. These individuals do not share a single geographic location, native language, or cultural background (e.g., traditions, beliefs, or religion). As a result, this virtual society cannot be classified as an ethnic or cultural entity. Therefore, such studies should be referred to as netnographic rather than ethnographic to ensure terminological accuracy. This principle applies to similar cases, emphasizing the specific focus of netnography on communities formed exclusively within digital environments.

IV. Analysis of Conceptual Boundaries and Terminological Localization

Referring to the previously discussed characteristics of virtual societies and their two types (purely virtual societies and those transitioning from reality), alongside the detailed definitions of ethno-graphic methods (both in real and virtual settings) and netnography, it becomes clear that:

Netnography pertains to the study of virtual societies in digital environments that have no connection to real-life communities. These virtual communities cease to exist once electronic devices and internet access are disconnected.

In contrast, virtual ethnography or online ethnography focuses on virtual societies that originate from real-world communities. These communities share common geographical, linguistic, cultural, and historical traits, allowing them to be studied through ethnographic methods in both the real and virtual realms. Even after disconnecting electronic devices, these communities remain real-world entities with ongoing interactions and cultural continuities.

IV .1 Examples for Clarification
IV .1.1 Netnographic Studies

Studying the community of global online gamers (e.g., PUBG players) exemplifies netnography. These players form a purely virtual society, united solely by their shared participation in the game, without any real-world cultural or geographic connections.

IV .1.2 Virtual Ethnographic Studies

Studying the Chaoui community in Algeria through Facebook pages dedicated to their cultural heritage exemplifies virtual ethnography. The Chaoui represent a real-world cultural group, creating a virtual society as an extension of their reality. Their shared traditions, language, and heritage continue to exist beyond the digital space.

Conclusion:

The distinction between virtual ethnographic studies and netnographic research lies in the nature of the studied community. Virtual ethnography focuses on communities that have real-world extensions, while netnography examines purely digital societies. These differences underscore the importance of precise terminological usage to maintain clarity in academic research.

Netnographic studies focus on digital communities that lack physical or cultural ties to the real world. In contrast, virtual ethnography applies to com-

munities that maintain real-world cultural and social connections.

Study Recommendations

Adaptation of Research Methodologies: Researchers in media and communication sciences should actively adapt various research methodologies to suit the digital environment. Regular academic conferences organized by Algerian universities can serve as valuable platforms for discussions, fostering the enrichment of research in this field. Clarification of Terminologies: Researchers must clearly define the intended scientific meanings of concepts and terms in their studies. Establishing a knowledge base of specialized terms that align with rapid technological transformations will contribute to cumulative scientific progress, creating a solid foundation for future researchers.

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