Senhri Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
A Journal of Pachhunga University College
(A Peer Reviewed Journal)
https://senhri-journal.pucollege.edu.in
10.36110/sjms.2025.10.01.001

2456-3757 (P)
2582-6840 (e)
Vol. 10, No. 01
Jan.-June, 2025

APPLICABILITY OF VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND NETNOGRAPHY IN DIGITAL SPACES: INSIGHTS FROM A FIELDWORK

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ABSTRACT

The paper positions digital ethnography as a legitimate and necessary methodological response to increasingly networked forms of social life, emphasizing the importance of treating online environments as socially consequential spaces. Being a relatively novel area of study, it is already burdened by established knowledge systems. As an attempt to bring more clarity, the paper examines the relevance of Christine Hine and Robert V. Kozinets' two varying ethnographic approaches for studying online communities, by utilizing insights from a year of immersive fieldwork in an online mobile role-playing game (RPG).

The paper is also a response to continuing skepticism that treats digital environments as curated, exaggerated, and less authentic than offline interaction; and situates virtual communities within broader sociological understandings of performance, social construction, and networked interaction.

Drawing on established theories that view social life as inherently performative, and reality as socially constructed, the article treats digital platforms as legitimate sites of meaning-making. Rather than approaching online interactions as secondary or artificial, it posits them as structured spaces where identities, hierarchies, and obligations are formed through sustained participation – reflecting the norms and constraints of the "real" world.

Keywords: *Virtual Ethnography, Netnography, Role Playing Game, Online Community.*

Introduction

Digital research continues to face a persistent epistemological skepticism: that online spaces are curated, exaggerated, and therefore analytically unreliable indicators of social reality. Turkle (2011) and Dean (2010) caution that digital interaction encourages curated and circulatory forms of expression, while Baudrillard's (1981) theory of simulation has been invoked to suggest the emergence of hyperreal mediated worlds. Yet such critiques presuppose a distinction between authentic

offline interaction and artificial online performance that collapses under classical sociological scrutiny.

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which social life is organized, experienced, and represented. From social networking platforms and online gaming communities to virtual religious gatherings and digital activism, social interaction increasingly unfolds within computer-mediated environments. As everyday practices migrate into digital spaces, the traditional boundaries between "online" and "offline" have become blurred, necessitating methodological innovation within the social sciences. In The Rise of the Network Society (1996), Manuel Castells clearly articulates the idea that contemporary life is inseparable from the network society. A closely aligned quotation from the text is:

"Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture (Castells, 1996, p. 629)."

This statement conveys that modern society is fundamentally structured around networks, meaning our economic systems, political institutions, cultural life, and everyday experiences are embedded within what he calls the network society. Another relevant passage that reflects the same idea is:

"The network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies (ibid., pp. 470)."

Together, these lines express Castells' core argument: contemporary life is structurally organized through networks, making participation in the network society not optional but constitutive of modern existence. In this context, virtual ethnography and netnography have emerged as vital research approaches for understanding contemporary social realities.

In Defence of Studying "Reality" of the Virtual World

The idea that online life is "performative" is often used to discredit it. Yet performativity is not unique to digital environments. Goffman (1956) demonstrates that all social interaction is dramaturgical. Individuals manage impressions depending on audience and context. Everyday life itself is staged, selective, and strategic. If offline life is already structured by impression management, then digital self-presentation is not an anomaly it is an extension of established social behavior mediated through technology. Thus, the charge that "online is performative" cannot serve as grounds for dismissing it as unreal. The argument aligns strongly with social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that reality is produced and maintained through shared meanings and symbolic interaction. Digital platforms are contemporary arenas where collective memory is negotiated, identity is articulate, gender norms are debated historical figures are reinterpreted. These processes are not simulations of reality; rather they are

mechanisms through which reality is constructed.

This study rejects the analytical separation between curated digital expression and social reality. Instead, it conceptualizes digital mediation as a form of performative social production. Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical framework, Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism, Hine's virtual ethnography, and Kozinets' netnography, the study treats digital discourse not as distortion, but as an active site of identity formation and collective meaning-making.

Within Castells' network society framework, these methods become not optional adaptations but necessary methodological responses. If social organization is networked, then fieldwork must follow networks. If we accept that interaction is dramaturgical (Goffman), identity is performative (Butler), reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann), society is networked (Castells), then dismissing digital life as unreal contradicts core sociological theory.

This paper puts the applicability of two major approaches in the study of digital spaces in the author's own ethnographic enquiry of an online mobile game community herein referred to as "the game". The ethnography has lasted near a year of regular logging in and engaging in the game's daily activities, which includes, besides playing the very game, interacting with other players. While the author may continue playing the game for recreation purposes, the ethnography so far has gathered adequate information for the contents of this paper.

Short Description of the Game

The game is not particularly unique in its structure and gameplay from other world building RPGs (Role Playing Games). RPGs stand out from traditional games because characters' skills and abilities have to be chosen carefully and upgraded as the game progresses linearly. In the game, players begin as rulers of a small settlement (their base or HQ) tasked with developing infrastructure, training troops, researching technologies, and expanding territorial influence. Core buildings include farms that produce "resources", barracks, defensive walls, research academies, and storage facilities. Progression is achieved through upgrading structures, unlocking stronger units, and improving heroes or commanders who lead armies into battle. The aim of the battle is to loot "resources" which are then utilized in upgrading one's own HQ; or to show supremacy at an individual or alliance level, and sometimes at an entire server level. A "server" is in-game language referring to grouping of players in usually un-encroachable separate virtual locations. Successful attacks weaken opponents' infrastructure at varying degrees of intensity. Territorial control and ranking systems create competition, often through seasonal events or global leaderboards. Players must balance economic management, military strategy, diplomacy, and alliance loyalty to thrive, or rather, to enjoy the game. The game, like many other online RPG games, sees its fair share of players quitting entirely, some due to personal issues, but mostly due

to their inability to play the game "at their own pace".

Hine's Virtual Ethnography or Kozinets' Netnography

Social media interactions are frequently dismissed as performative, strategic, or algorithm-driven distortions of authentic experience. This skepticism rests upon a problematic assumption that offline social life is somehow unmediated and authentic, while online interaction is artificial.

Early ethnographic traditions were grounded in physically bounded field sites and face-to-face interactions. However, scholars such as Christine Hine argue that the internet should not be viewed merely as a tool but as a cultural space where meanings are constructed and negotiated. In *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), Hine reconceptualizes the field as fluid, dispersed, and embedded in technological infrastructures. Virtual ethnography thus enables researchers to trace social relations, identities, and discourses as they are performed and stabilised through digital practices. It responds to the epistemological challenge posed by networked societies in which culture is increasingly mediated, archived, and algorithmically shaped.

Similarly, Robert V. Kozinets develops netnography as a systematic adaptation of ethnography to online communities. In *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (2010), he emphasizes that online interactions generate rich, naturally occurring data that reveal shared norms, values, and symbolic systems. Netnography addresses the need for culturally sensitive, ethically reflexive, and methodologically rigorous research in digital environments. It is particularly significant in examining consumer cultures, fan communities, diasporic networks, political mobilizations, and marginalized identities that find expression in online spaces.

Although similar, the two philosophies do have points of separation. Let us now focus on a few of the dissimilarities and accentuate it with insights from the author's fieldwork.

I. Research Design

For Hine, ethnography in online contexts should remain reflexive and flexible, questioning how the field itself is constructed. Her predisposition is a result of her aim to capture the fluidity of mediated social life. Kozinets however believes in a more structured and systematic approach similar to a conventional research design with clear guidelines and aims including identification of subject matter, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations etc.

In the game, the author has found that while a researcher would benefit the most from a flexible interactive schedule, the mode of communication becomes a hindrance. Unlike a face-to-face conversation, chatting through typed texts is not only laborious but it also hinders a natural and spontaneous flow of information. It is a tendency of most players to "catch up" to conversations in the chat channels once they log in; for example, posting a question, then logging off, and then reading the answers only once they log in again. Readers may refer to their one

friend who takes their time replying to a phone text message.

Nevertheless, a flexible and laborious process can still be an informative one unlike Kozinets' proposal which has not only logistical impracticality, but ironically also has ethical considerations. Kozinets believes in the relative stability of the field site, and this in turn is what makes him believe in a systematic investigation. The author believes that the element of predictability is necessary to make a rigorous research design. Virtual spaces do have norms to provide said predictability, but these norms have not yet stood the test of time as real-world norms have. Virtual norms, one can say, lack the internalization process (Parsons, 1951) through which societal norms and cultural values are adopted by individuals, thus becoming part of their own personality structure. The unpredictability thus negates the possibility of some traditional research techniques such as sampling, and designating time slots for various phases of the research. Moreover, Kozinets' consumer oriented methodology suggests archival study of posts, comments, user profiles, and interaction threads. In contemporary times, sharing of users' personal data has become a debated issue, raising ethical issues to the extent of putting even mega-corporation on their back foot and/or in damage control mode.

Thus, this paper is in agreement with Hine on the matter.

II. Constructing the Field

Hine argues that the field is not a bounded, pre-existing entity but is constructed through the ethnographer's engagements – not merely through interaction, but at the very onset when defining its boundaries. For Hine, online environments are not separate "places" but are embedded within broader social contexts. Since the field is constituted through connections, movements, and interpretive decisions, the researcher's presence is not simply an external disturbance—it is constitutive of what counts as the field itself.

This line of thought is in tandem with criticisms of traditional ethnography, especially anthropological ones, which state that a researcher can never truly be an insider. Even if, let's say, an indigenous scholar decides upon a study of his own society, his very persona as a researcher would put a level of defence on the respondent. Think of this as, having a dinner conversation with your father as opposed to asking him a specific question the answer to which he knows will end up in your research findings.

Although Kozinets proposes possibilities of active participation (which *will* reconstitute the field) and passive observation (which supposedly won't), the author's field experience shows that being a passive observer may not be a choice – at least if the intention is to stay in the field longer. In order to be able to play the game, at least at an enjoyable level, one needs a minimal amount of *regular* activity – both of the actual gameplay and of interaction with other players. Such activity ensures membership in the larger alliances and hence, to a large degree, the safety of your HQ from random attacks from other players.

Even within one's alliance mates, one needs to stand out in order to avail to some in-game benefits like sharing of in-game gifts. Consequently, we can surmise that any level of regular activity cannot but affect the dynamics of the player community.

Thus, this paper is in agreement with Hine on the matter

III. Performativity amidst Norms

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework posits that social interaction, whether face-to-face or mediated, is inherently performative. Individuals continuously manage impressions across settings. Butler (1990) extends this logic, arguing that identity itself is constituted through repeated performative acts. From this perspective, online participation cannot be treated as categorically distinct from offline social action; both are sites where identities are enacted, negotiated, and stabilized. Anthropological relativism strongly emphasizes that norms derive from cultural systems of meaning. Boas (1911) argued against evolutionary hierarchies of culture and insisted that: "Civilization is not something absolute, but… is relative, and our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes." Boas' position establishes that moral codes, social expectations, and behavioral standards are embedded in specific cultural contexts. What appears "normal" or "natural" is socially learned within a given society.

However, cultural specificity does not eliminate the possibility of broader normative convergence. Durkheim (1893/1997) argued that every society requires a moral foundation, a "collective conscience." He writes, "The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system with a life of its own." While the content of collective conscience differs across societies, the existence of shared moral norms is universal to social life. Moving further into modern theory, Jürgen Habermas (1990) proposed that norms gain universal validity when they can be justified through rational discourse. He states: "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse." Habermas does not claim that all norms are universal, but that certain norms can achieve universal legitimacy when grounded in inclusive deliberation. Similarly, John W. Meyer (2007) explains how global models such as human rights, citizenship, education, and gender equality diffuse across societies: "Worldwide models define and legitimize actors, their purposes, and their activities." This suggests that some norms become globally institutionalized and widely accepted beyond their original cultural context.

a) Fluidity of Identity

Hine treats online identity as fluid, relational, and situationally constructed, "The Internet can be understood as both a culture and a cultural artefact" (2000, pp. 14). She resists the idea that online spaces create wholly new or detached identities. Instead, she argues that identities emerge through interaction and are embedded within broader social contexts. Although Kozinets

does acknowledge fluidity, he is more concerned with how identities stabilize within online communities, especially consumption-oriented ones. For him, identity is recognizable through posting history, stabilized through reputation, and structured through norms and roles (e.g., expert, newbie, moderator, etc.).

Within online gaming communities, identities are not as fluid or transient as is often assumed in discussions of digital self-presentation. Particularly among highly active participants, in-game nicknames and alliance affiliations tend to remain relatively stable over time, contributing to the consolidation of recognizable social identities. Once a player becomes established as active, skilled, or strategically significant within an alliance, a set of collective expectations emerges regarding their participation, responsiveness, and contribution to group objectives.

Such expectations can generate a sense of obligation that structures daily routines. In my own experience, I occasionally felt compelled to allocate specific times of the day to fulfil in-game responsibilities. Other players have openly acknowledged setting alarms to wake during the night in order to complete time-sensitive tasks, defend territories, or participate in coordinated alliance activities. These practices illustrate the extent to which gameplay can extend beyond leisure and become embedded in everyday temporal rhythms.

Moreover, discussions on other social media platforms such as Reddit and Facebook reveal broader concerns regarding excessive engagement and gaming-related dependency. Users frequently report tensions within family life arising from prolonged gameplay, suggesting that participation in such online environments can have significant social and relational consequences beyond the digital sphere.

Thus, this paper is in agreement with Kozinets on the matter.

b) Power Structures

A major point of discussion in Hine and Kozinets is the line between the online and the offline. Hine sees the two as indistinguishable while Kozinets see only traces of the online in the offline. Let us scrutinize this issue through the lens of virtual power structures.

The power structure or hierarchy of the game has similar and dissimilar connections with the real-world. Max Weber (1978) defined power as the ability to impose one's will on others, even against resistance; and authority is legitimized power, accepted as rightful by those subjected to it. In the game, those with power had the tendency to achieve authority as well in the form of being either the leader or a small group of leaders that run an alliance. Consequently, the bigger the alliance the more power the leader can have. This power is used to make members of alliance(s) across the entire server to follow rules that are not inbuilt in the game mechanics. For instance, the game allows a player to attack another player from another alliance; but various servers enacted a no-attack policy on up to 10 alliances of the same server (the intention being that weaker players should grow stronger so the server can perform better in inter-server

events). Evidently, not all players are in agreement but are forced to follow the rule for fear of being evicted from their alliances.

The dissimilarity is in the manner or channel through which a player may achieve comparatively more power than others. For Weber (ibid), power comes through the trifecta of class, status, and Party. For Foucault (1980), knowledge and its application in "everything" creates power. For Bourdieu (1986), power comes from the four forms of capital namely, economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. As complex as power is in the real-world, the power in the game comes from a singular factor – the ability to pay real-world money for in-game benefits, colloquially referred to as "pay-to-win" (as opposed to those who do not i.e. "free-to-play"). In-game micro-transactions provide a competitive advantage over non-paying players, particularly in multiplayer environments; and the more you purchase the more power you would have. The author has witnessed instances of players who buy almost every possible daily and periodical offers, some players admittedly having spent $75000 or more so far. Their financial investment can significantly shape in-game power hierarchies and alliance dynamics. Players who do pay but still can't catch up with the big spenders sometimes end up selling their gaming accounts through other social media channels, and some even quit. Ironically, even though under the genre of "strategy" games, the gameplay itself requires minimal mental and physical skills.

What makes this source of power blur the online/offline debates is that one cannot conclude if such a phenomenon is in tandem with Hine – since the money comes from the real-world and directly affects the in-game world; or with Kozinets – since the phenomenon can be attributed to a number of factors: is it because of individual economic affluence or addiction, is it seen as a necessity for base level enjoyment of the game, is it an overcompensation for lack of status in real life, and so on.

The paper is still undecided on the matter. The only takeaway here is that, "For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action" (Homans, 1961).

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine whether Christine Hine's virtual ethnography or Robert V. Kozinets' netnography offers a more adequate framework for studying contemporary online communities. Rather than positioning the two approaches as mutually exclusive, the analysis demonstrates that each illuminates different dimensions of digitally mediated social life. Yet, when grounded in the author's field experience, certain theoretical commitments of each approach prove more persuasive in specific domains.

With regard to research design and the construction of the field, Hine's emphasis on reflexivity, fluidity, and the co-constituted nature of the field offers a more convincing methodological orientation. Unpredictability and relative instability of norms of the virtual world, and the impossibility of remaining a truly passive observer challenge the feasibility of a strict step-by-step

approach as propounded by Kozinets. In online gaming environments, participation is not merely a methodological choice but a condition of sustained access. The field is enacted through engagement.

Conversely, in relation to identity stabilization, Kozinets' framework provides sharper explanatory power. While digital theory frequently emphasizes fluidity and multiplicity, the author's fieldwork observations suggest that identities often solidify through sustained participation, alliance membership, and reputational accumulation. Nicknames become durable markers of status; expectations are made of recognized players; and routine obligations extend gameplay into everyday life. Identity may be performative, but repetition solidifies the performance into structure.

The analysis of power structures further complicates the online/offline distinction central to both scholars. The "pay-to-win" dynamic demonstrates that economic capital from the offline world can translate directly into symbolic and strategic dominance within the game. Yet the meaning of that spending—whether as consumption practice, status signaling, addiction, leisure, or compensation—cannot be reduced to a single explanatory logic. Power in this context appears neither purely virtual nor purely material but hybrid.

Admittedly, the insights in this paper are made from a singular field, but they ostensibly provide a good starting point for further debates – the aim of which is clarity and consensus in ethnographic techniques and philosophy.

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