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ON THE ETHICS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH IN NETNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The paper aims to discuss the ethical challenges in netnography by highlighting the main dilemmas which develop around what counts as public versus private, whether treating digital data as texts or people's representations, if referring to the authentic embodied self or its digital representation, when sacrificing accuracy to privilege ethics. Such dilemmas refocus our attention on regulatory concepts like privacy, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality challenging basic regulation terms. The ethical principles emerging from this discussion call for context sensitivity and reflexivity.

Keywords

Netnography, ethics, digital social research

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although the ethical dimension is a fundamental component of any social research, Digital Social Research opens novel and unexpected ethical challenges in the whole research process: from data collection to analysis. Netnography, a qualitative approach for exploring digital cultural context, is not an exception, and it poses particular and innovative ethical controversies which need to be identified and addressed.

Ethical challenges in netnography are difficult to standardize and discipline. Thus, the paper does not aim to provide formulas, but it aims to highlight controversies and detect ethical principles to follow. Providing regulatory guidelines may, indeed, be counterproductive, only reinforcing the practice of writing research proposals in ways that allow them to be approved. This would limit ethical questions to those included in a checkbox and ethics to a process of avoiding errors (Markham, 2018).

Moreover, ethics are not universal, but people, context and discipline dependent. They differ according to people and what they think to be ethical, to culture and their norms, their understanding of morality and social conduct, to disciplines and methods which show different standards for how to navigate ethics.

The paper focuses on the ethics of netnography. Ethical issues are not very considered in the netnographic practice. Quite surprisingly, a recent scoping review of netnography shows that a high proportion of papers do not even tackle the ethical issues (Delli Paoli, D'Auria 2025). Although, some ethical issues of netnography have been separately discussed in some contributions (Markham 2003; 2006; 2017), a comprehensive overview of the specific netnographic challenges is still lacking.

Thus, the paper aims to highlight what constitutes the core of ethics in netnography: dilemmas with their benefits and costs. Dilemmas are not univocally solvable, are difficult, peculiar and case-based challenges without clear choices and outcomes.

Such dilemmas develop around dichotomic options:

- *Text versus people*: is netnography a text-based or a people-based research? Are digital information and narratives documents or people's worlds?
- *Public versus Private*: Are digital information and narrative public or private? How to distinguish the public/private nature of digital information? Is it an ethic or an emic choice?
- *Covert versus overt*: which is the border between accuracy (e.g. to preserve the non-intrusiveness of information) and ethics

(e.g., to uncover the presence of researchers) in observation? When does the benefit of research overcome its ethical costs?

- *Physical versus digital*: is ethically appropriate to follow the traditional scientific impulse to uncover the real and physical culture or its digital representation (which may not have any correspondence to their physical counterparts)?

Such dilemmas refocus our attention on regulatory concepts like privacy, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality challenging basic regulation terms.

These are the main questions at the heart of this paper. Answers to these questions are not simple and the choices we make have significant practical and ethical consequences.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of netnography. The other sections face different dilemmas in netnographic research. Then questions about informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality in digital contexts are raised. In the last section some concluding remarks are provided.

2. NETNOGRAPHY

Netnography is the last response to the progressive extension of the ethnographic object and field. Just in a very simplistic way, it can be defined as a non-standard and qualitative approach transposing and adapting ethnographic research to the digital contexts. However, due to extreme differences between the physical and the digital, the digital transposition of ethnography cannot be considered a mere adaptation.

It involves the long term, engaged and more or less participatory observation of digital phenomena through discussions and interactions developing in digital contexts in order to provide deep descriptions of perspectives of particular populations, to interpret phenomena, practices, cultures (*thick description*).

Like ethnography also netnography requires immersion in a relevant social phenomenon. Immersion in netnography does not equal participation as in ethnography where a researcher cannot hide his/her physical presence. In netnography immersion is engagement and it means the personal, intellectual, cultural, historical, emotional, social involvement of the researcher in the social phenomenon (Kozinets, Gretzel 2023).

The cognitive goal of digital ethnography remains related to the

reconstruction of cultures with their horizons of meanings and practices. Thus, netnographic research is not aimed at understanding media uses or technological practices for their own sake but at interpreting cultures that find digital expression, their related identity, relational, symbolic, normative, and value experiences.

Cultures or subcultures that emerge from the convergence of media and the mediation and remediation of identities represent the main object of netnography. Thus, it is not limited to new cultural formations that emerge online and through the digital, but it extends to cultural or subcultural groups and practices that, due to the supposed and perceived anonymity of digital communication or the stigmatization that some cultures experience in physical contexts, find distinctive spaces for discussion in digital contexts (underground, stigmatized, minority populations) (Delli Paoli 2022).

If the object of digital ethnography remains culture, its scope is hermeneutic: culture is understood as a text that must be interpreted and not just decoded by the ethnographer, in an endless process of production of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973). Interpreting a culture is like interpreting a vast text or collection of texts to piece together the story of stratified meanings. Since cultures are traced back to easily accessible postings, comments, and discussions, as well as cultural artifacts that can be read and reread, dismantled, archived, mixed, assembled, articulated and disarticulated ad infinitum, the text in netnography is literal rather than metaphorical (as in ethnography).

Thus, netnography can be defined as a long-term and thick observation of culture carried out on narratives and discourse developed in digital fields. In netnography the digital field is the discursive terrain where the social phenomenon under study is discursively built.

3. ETHICAL DILEMMAS

3.1 Text-based vs people-based research

Positions on the ethical issues in digital research may be articulated around a dichotomy between text and people.

Being web-based objects such as SNSs, bulletin boards, comments, posts, blogs, in principle, electronic documents (Ess and Committee, 2002), research involving such documents is by some considered not human-subject research (Enyon et al., 2009) but text-based research. Within this perspective, Internet texts can be viewed as cultural products

and artifacts and this removes human subjects from the frame of reference (Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002; Hookway, 2008; White, 2002). Those who believe that digital data are texts and not people,, by leveraging on the textual nature of digital data believe they can gloss over the ethical issue. According to this perspective, people would need to be protected, the documents they produce would not: if, therefore, people are removed in the digital research process, ethical protocols such as informed consent become superfluous.

The texts which represent the empirical basis of netnography are user-generated, non-provoked information, routinely generated on the web in the daily use of the Internet (e.g. posts, comments published on social media or communities, blogs; photos of our private life; video diaries; profiles of our social accounts, etc.). They differ substantially from the traditional empirical basis of social research. They are supposed to have a naturalistic and non-intrusive character (Cardano, 2011: 28) since individuals, by producing this information in their daily use of the internet, are barely aware of data collection and they do not modify their behaviors, opinions, thoughts in response to their awareness of being observed or part of a study (artificial situation).

In netnography texts are the building blocks of culture because they are presentations and representations of identity, norms and practices through narratives. Narrative is an existential, identity and social practice. Storytelling is a constitutive feature of man as such: the meaning of existence is constructed in storytelling through the narration of our history. Narrative is a mediation between man and the external world, between man and other men, and between man and himself (Ricoeur 1994). Narrative is thus a privileged context for the exploration of identity and culture and the building of communities.

The scope of netnography is to detect and recognize the layer of humanity behind texts, technologies and affordances, to understand through texts the lived experience of particular human beings (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2024).

Digital data challenges the ontological distinction between data produced by people and people themselves by fragmenting people into incoherent and decontextualized data traces (Markham, Tiinderberg, Herman, 2018). This accentuates the distance between the people and the data they produce. Moreover, the fact that data are "found" and not provoked by researcher, allow to obtain private data without even intervening in the life of people to gather them. This further strengthens the sense of distance between researcher and the subject. Such double distance – between data and subjects and between researcher and subjects – may

obscure ethical issues.

Although it is not always immediately detectable and intuitable how, at what point, and at what level people are involved in digital information, they all involve people: we need not forget that texts are under the agency of real people with feelings and rights. Therefore, netnography needs to consider principles of research on human subjects and ethical and normative accountability related to the consequences of research.

To indicate the presence of people in digital data and consequent harms which may derive from their primary and secondary use, Metcalf and Crawford (2016) use the term *data subjectivity.* Also Zook et al. (2017) recognize as the first (out of 10) rule of responsible digital research the acknowledge that data are people and can do harm.

3.2 Public VS Private

Those who opt for considering digital narratives as texts and not people, although admitting the distinction between a published book and personal information and narratives released online, believe that the use of such information raises privacy issues more than ethical ones (Wilkinson and Thelwall, 2011).

In this regard, it might be useful to distinguish between different types of privacy (Moor, 2004; Tavani, 2005) and in particular between natural and normative privacy: the former matures on the level of expectations, the latter is protected by law.

A person in a remote place configures a naturally private situation: on a remote and hard-to-reach island or mountain, people can expect protection and privacy, they expect to be hidden from others, that whatever they did would not be observed.

In contrast, the release of personal information to a bank configures a normatively private situation: this information is protected legislatively, people expect the bank to protect that information from malicious use and require the bank to keep that information confidential and not disclose it. Public digital information would fall into the first type, and this would justify the use of such information for research purposes.

However, this calls into question the *public-private dichotomy*: even in naturally private situations, while there are no legislatively defined boundaries, people might have expectations of privacy even though they are not formally entitled to it and regardless of the supposed public context where they are.

Some spaces, although being public, may be perceived as private. It

is the case of some blogs or online communities where people publish diaries which are perceived as their private diaries, irrespective of their public nature. This implies that divulgation of such information by research is considered inappropriate, breaches and violates the expectations of privacy. Markham (2018) reports the case of Greta, a component of a community of women interested in home styling and interior design, who openly publish posts and photos about her home on the community, but she wanted her blog to remain private and not known in her physical surrounding.

In contrast, some spaces or topics although being private, sensitive and intimate, may be considered public. For example, in his study of a blog of friends of a sick woman (Susan) with heart disease and waiting for an organ transplant, Koufaris (2001) demonstrated that although being on an intimate theme, the blog was perceived as a public space. The website, daily followed by hundreds of people seeking constant updates on her health, anecdotes, testimonies, videos, and pictures of her battle, becomes a way to publicly disseminate an extremely intimate and private event such as the battle for life of Susan. Although the sensitive topic, participants had no expectations of privacy, were very open about their identity and made no effort to conceal it. Markham (2018) reports also the case of Kersten's blog about the suicide of her daughter, built as a retrospective journey of the year before suicide, rich of detailed descriptions of experiences, emotions and pieces of life. Kersten expressed the need to keep the blog public and to make her voice heard in order to raise awareness about the pain that suicide causes to those who survive.

The distinction between public and private becomes very blurred in digital contexts, and the boundaries between the two spheres are neither comparable to those traceable in physical contexts, nor they can be conceptualized according to the pre-digital assumptions. Just to make an example think of the distinction between social arena typical of offline contexts where we are able to reveal or conceal aspects of ourselves according to varying audience. In digital context we are not able to maintain separate faces in distinct social arena anymore. Digital messages are directed to an indistinct mass including family, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and strangers blurring the boundaries between formal and informal spheres (*context collapse*) (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). To matter seems to be both the nature of the message but also its context. They both affect, shape and limit our roles, behaviors and expectations.

From this point of view, Goffman's exploration of identity offers an interesting approach, through his fundamental ordering category for identity performance: the dichotomy between frontstage (public/openness)

and backstage (private/ secrecy). The identity performance of individuals through recounting of personal narratives occurs increasingly more online, in digital arenas. As in the classical dramaturgical model, individuals still present themselves in front of each other, but the prerequisites for social interaction and the boundaries between intimate and public sphere are different. Frontstage is the social and public arena where performance is held in front of an intended audience which excludes outsiders. Backstage is the private and intimate sphere, an informal area where individuals step out of character (Goffman, 1959: 144). The digital upsets boundaries between the two regions, turning this model upside down and sometimes reversing dramaturgical performance. In digital spaces, by accurately selecting strategies and visual elements of their presence, individuals engage in online impression management, which is important for online identity performances. The audience does not appear anymore only in the front region and the outsiders are not excluded (there is no way to exclude unwelcome individuals apart from the liked audience). The performance is even more theatrical and dramaturgical, but the intimacy is ritualized, and intimate is sublimated so that frontstage is sometimes staged as backstage.

Think for example of traditional intimate and private phenomena such as suicide which in the practice of publishing the last notes on social media is transformed into a public-facing genre (Marres, 2017). Or the practice of maintaining the relationships with death people after death through the dead person's social media profiles. Davide Sisto (2018) observes that such elaboration of grief passes through social profiles when social actors make use of them to leave direct messages to their deceased: the interaction is similar to that which takes place during a dialogue/soliloquy at the cemetery, but in the digital sphere such intimate and personal dialogue takes on the characteristics of intersubjectivity and the generalized other becomes, in some way, a participant in pain. The social profile of the deceased, often "memorialized" through specific procedures provided in the context of social networks, becomes the point of contact between the living and the deceased, between life and death, allows for the creation of community around loss. There are even "griefbots," digital clones, digital ghosts of the dead.

Some digital spaces resemble backstage performances and are those that need to be considered private, regardless of the public nature of the content. They may be conceptualized under the notion of "parochiality": although being public they engender intimate forms of communication. It is the case experienced in a netnography on asexuality. Asexuality is a lack of sexual attraction toward other people. For asexuals the online

communities represent a dedicate space, far from a sexual affirmative social context (a society where sexuality and sex are central and omnipresent), to legitimize and build sexual selfhood projects. By entering one of the main online communities on asexuality we soon realized that it was perceived as a socializing agency to build a communal identity through a negotiated process of identification and interaction with significant others. Stories, biographies and experiences can be shared only with those who have similar attitudes. Like a family, the community were perceived as a safe, informal and self-regulating space of self-definition of asexuality that, although being public, oppose to society (which pathologize asexuality) and outsiders (who impose sexuality as an imperative). A form of backstage performance (Delli Paoli and Masullo, 2022).

In the same way, in a study of online coming out by lesbians, the authors decided to apply strict ethical protocol although the online community and its content was public. They soon realized that participants conceived the community as a semi-private and protected space. They use confessional and biographical posting, identity presentations which resembled backstage performances. Thus, they decided to obscure the name of the community and to change also pseudonyms (Munt, Bassett, O'Riordan, 2002).

Both these communities are conceived as socializing spaces containing personal stories not to shore outside that specific context.

For this reason, we claim that ethics goes beyond the regulatory dimension of digital data protection and what appears to be normatively public or private and that digital research is in need of new ethical consciousnesses (Markham, 2017; Varis, 2014) that are difficult to predefine but are inspired by the principle of care, a principle that goes beyond the simple claim of not causing harm (Boellstoorff, Nardi, Taylor, 2012).

Considering the sensitivity of the topic is not enough as the example of Kersten and Greta demonstrate: also in the case of non-sensitive topic people may have expectations of privacy and also in the case of sensitive topics people may express the desire to make their voice heard. Sensitivity does not imply directly privacy or vulnerability and viceversa non sensitivity does not imply necessarily public or non-vulnerability.

Defining something as private or public, as sensitive or not and someone as vulnerable or not has implication for how we assume it should be treated in a research context.

The concept of harm needs to be reconsidered overcoming the equivalence private as harmful and public as unharmful. Considering

digital data, the assumption that publicly available information cannot cause any further harm to an individual cannot be considered true. Identity disclosure of people in public communities perceived as private may cause involuntary outings, the revelation of sexual orientations outside the community without the person's will.

Moreover, in digital research it is critical to consider also potentially risk-laden correlations deriving for example from combining seemingly innocuous and anonymized public datasets to other data sets. Think for example to netnography carried out on public social media profiles of a specific geographical community. Financial institutions, by linking this information with their dataset, may infer credit worthiness and orient their decisions to provide credit. Public information may cause economic harm (by affecting their ability to get a loan) to particular individuals and communities (Metcalf and Crawford 2016). Obviously the higher the depth of information, the higher the ethical implications: a single Instagram photo is less problematic than the history of all social media posts of an individual (which is frequent in netnography).

The approach taken here rejects the idea that a simple dichotomy — usually between public and private (sensitive, intimate) information — is sufficient for adjudicating ethical claims. It is therefore important to distinguish between what is ethically public or private but also between what is emically perceived as public and private. Such fences vary between context and context, culture and culture, person and person, and need to be ethnographically defined. It is crucial to focus on people's expectations, on the sensitivity of topics and data and vulnerability of populations and on the impetus to anticipate privacy breaches and minimize harm.

3.3 Physical VS Digital

Within digital spaces the self exists as a textual body. This textual body exists as a separate "entity" from the physical body, an entity which may also be false in "real" terms.

Digital traces have been considered the empirical basis of non-intrusive techniques being not disturbed by the presence of researcher and not influenced by it. For some the non-intrusiveness of digital traces plays in favor of data quality and trustworthiness in particular. Not being disturbed by the presence of a researcher asking direct questions, this information is supposed to be more authentic, sincere, and so more reliable.

However, digital information is still affected by some forms of bias common also in traditional survey research and mainly related to identity and self-presentation strategies. First, the social desirability bias. Social desiderability is a well-known tendency for social researchers first identified by the methodologist Allen Edwards (1957) more than 60 years ago by analyzing responses to the well-known Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory psychological test.

Social desirability can be defined as the tendency to provide normative and non-sincere responses to questions of a survey. This risk is higher, the lower is the interest in the topic of the question and the presence of strong opinions about it and the more sensitive and reactive is the topic (Marradi, 2007). This is an unconscious tendency, only rarely resulting from a conscious decision to lie. Such tendency seems to be present also in digital fields and user-produced information. We can hardly consider digital traces as authentic, true and transparent point of access to the individual identity. Most of time, digital content (being it texts, comments, posts or photos, images, video, links, etc.) is carefully selected to adhere to one's idealized self. Like in the answers to a questionnaire, also in the publication of digital information people move as a maker of impressions in the human task of staging a performance able to provide to others a coherent self-image adherent to social norms (Goffman, 1959). Social media and digital platforms are the new frames where identity is performed through models that resemble the principles of social desirability.

However, digital social desirability may take also forms different from those we are used to in survey and mainstream research. While in some cases it may tend as in traditional social research to reinforce conformism, emphasizing adherence to social normativity and culturally accepted standards and expectations of behavior, in other it can reinforce anti-conformism. Also, thanks to anonymity, on the internet people may have the need to appear more anti-normative than they are. They can emphasize their otherness, opposition, dissent from normative and social-orientated discourse, also by offensive, deliberately anti-political language that defies the codes of political correctness and sometimes takes on the connotations of hate speech. We call this form of bias *social undesirability*.

This may also be due to the difference between private and public opinions and the tendency of individuals to have various opinions and attitudes towards the same object/topic. Such differences may be incompatible if expressed in the same context but compatible if expressed in different online or offline contexts.

Moreover, the presence of non-human entities such as bots or autonomous internet-based computer programs designed to imitate human behavior and automatically interact with humans put into question trustworthiness of digital traces. The same for fake accounts who may be created for marketing reasons, social media consumption motivations or diffusion of hate speech, armful or fake content, propaganda, etc.

Being false or not, in real world digital selves produce real consequences: "real becomes a double negative; simply put, when experiences are experienced, they cannot be 'not real'" (Markham, 1998: 120). The example of the married couple formed by David and Amy Taylor, unemployed and obese in the real life and slim and professionally realized in their Second Life, who had their marriage destroyed by Amy's discovery of the virtual affair of David with a sex worker in Second Life, make the point clear (Ashford, 2009).

The trustworthiness of digital traces may become secondary. Indeed, when interested in exploring identity, it is not the truth of information to be important but their truth for participants: "When people perceive things to be real, they will be real in their consequences" (Thomas, 1928). Digital identities sometimes may offer a means to escape the boundaries of embodied bodies and contexts. In such cases, texts and not bodies or contexts offer a better representation of their beings. It is ethically correct (and not exclusively for anonymity reasons) to resist the tendency of seeking authenticity or validity by for example comparing the digital and physical representations to see if they match. As Markham (2003) highlights:

> We naturally trust our traditional senses of sight, smell, and touch, taste and hearing to provide verification of concrete reality. In essentially disembodied relationships and cultures, however, this desire bleeds integrity from the project of knowing the other in context. (p. 60)

3.4 Covert versus overt

Two basic strategies of access to the field can be identified in netnography:

- *Covert access*: the researcher does not inform the research subjects, of his or her presence and role as a researcher;
- *Overt access*: the researcher overtly makes his presence known, informs participants about the research objectives, and requests some form of consent to participate.

Both strategies have pros and cons, and the choice cannot be made

regardless of the research question, the peculiarities of the digital context being investigated, the level of sensitivity/reactivity of the topic being investigated, and the balance between observational choices and ethical risks or consequences on the subjects being observed (Cardano, 2011).
Covert access may have advantages in terms of minimizing the intrusiveness of the research but has ethical implications (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Hine, 2005; Bell, 2001; Heath, Koch, Ley, Montoya, 1999; Garcia , Standlee, Bechkoff, Cui, 2009; Kozinets, 2010):

- it violates the imperative for researchers to always reveal his or her presence and research intentions to the subjects studied;
- it violates the participatory nature of research, making it a unidirectional process of appropriation;
- it violates the dialogic nature of research, making it a superficial practice. This has consequences for the knowledge process, not allowing for a deep understanding of phenomena (a prerequisite of traditional ethnography).

Avoiding participation can also have consequences for the texts collected by the ethnographer, many of which are invisible in the public sections of digital platforms (Mason, 1996; Leaning, 1998; Heath, Koch, Ley, Montoya, 1999; Hine, 2000).

In contrast, overt access is ethically sound but intrusive. Proponents of the covert approach (Hewer and Brownlie, 2007; Beaven and Laws, 2007; Langer and Beckman, 2005) believe, indeed, that informing community members of the researcher's identity would undermine the main advantage of the approach, i.e., its non-intrusiveness. The richness of this information would lie in its being derived from socially constructed interactions among like-minded individuals rather than from interaction with researchers that would limit it to only provoked information. In addition, a covert approach would overcome the power asymmetry between researchers and participants and the risk that the researcher may put his or her self first in the meaning-making process (Atkinson and DePalma, 2008; Kavanaugh and Maratea, 2020).

This may be particularly important for sensitive topics, invisible, hard-to-reach and stigmatized, purely digital populations which would not welcome the presence of a researcher, or anyone perceived as an *outsider*, deviant or illegal phenomena, extreme activism, communities in the deep or dark web. Covert observation may be ethically acceptable only in those cases that otherwise may not be studied on the condition it fully preserves the privacy and anonymity of participants.

In all other cases overt observation is necessary and participants need

to be informed. However, as we will see in the next paragraph, traditional informed consent may be not enough.

In the case of overt access, compliance with community rules, behavioral expectations, and norms specific to the digital contexts involved, is also ethically critical. It is ethically correct to respect behaviors or practices that have meaning and value within the context under investigation. It is what Cardano (2011) calls *pragmatic participation*, the understanding and application of the rules of conduct and behavioral practices of a given community, of the syntax of a given culture: ways of greeting, calling each other, rituals of farewell, strategies of communication and interaction, etc. We usually realize we have not understood a community norm after we have unknowingly violated it, from the reactions of natives to our unintentional "gaffe". In digital, more than perhaps in physical relationships, these mistakes can undermine the possibility of being well-accepted and staying in that context.

It is therefore necessary to know netiquette, community norms, rules, and group syntax before entering the field. Many studies report cases of researchers not being accepted due to violation of community norms (LeBesco, 2004). Learning these norms, specific to different digital contexts, can also take place through a brief phase of covert observation preparatory to unveiling one's role as a researcher and useful to familiarize oneself with the field, the practices, languages and symbolic resources of the participants, to identify the most active members, possible gatekeepers, discussion topics, technical strategies of the context and affordances used. In case of overt access, we need also to consider the inclusiveness of the field. In exclusive fields (such as many of those which although public are perceived as private) also personal attributes of researcher may matter. In these fields personal attributes such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, occupation, etc. may impact on access and participation. A case of an exclusive netnographic field is the communities of incels (involuntary celibates). The difficulty of accessing this field by a female researcher who wants to explore a community of self-described misogynistic males appears evident in Sugiura's (2022) research. In digital contexts, it is not so much the actual identity of the researchers that matters, given both the possibility of hiding socio-demographic information online and the potential to explore multiple identities. In contrast to face-to-face interactions, in digital contexts identity clues are less overt. In this research, the researcher embarked on a path of careful management of her digital identity, of meticulous attention to digital communications, the posts she made, the "likes" she entered, and the materials she shared, in order not to be provocative. She also avoided

appearing provocative through strategies of including/excluding aspects of her identity in the biographies of the various social media accounts associated with her account. However, she decided to maintain her feminist identity despite knowing that this would make her an enemy in the eyes of the incels, for ethical reasons and also because she did not want to sacrifice such relevant aspects of her identity for research purposes.

4. BEYOND STATIC INFORMED CONSENT

In general terms, informed consent implies that researchers commit to providing detailed information about the purpose, duration, risks, and benefits of the research for participants and that participants are granted the absolute right to withdraw from the research at any time.

The concept has a long history in biomedical research, where it is conceived as the fundamental mechanism for ensuring that research prioritizes the well-being of participants. Most ethics committees require that all human-subjects research include informed consent; exceptions must be carefully justified.

However, we cannot merely translate the notion of informed consent derived from biomedicine to social science research: being informed about a medical experiment is different from being informed about ethnographic research. Compared to a medical experiment with its certainly more immediate aims, in social research participants, even the most educated, often know little about ethnography and social research and understand even less about its goals.

Signing an informed consent could therefore in ethnographic research turn into a mere ritualized practice that prescinds from the participants' real understanding of the goals and consequences of the research.

The type of procedures required depends on the presumed severity of the risks: the greater the risk the more formalized the procedure must be. However, regardless of the risks it is always important to reveal the nature and objectives of the research and the role of researchers. Informing strategies are highly contextual and dependent on the cognitive goals, the type of digital field, and the affordances.

Crucially, it is essential to create a digital context for presenting the research. In some cases, a short textual presentation that links to multimedia content (video clips presenting the research) and provides in-depth references may be necessary.

For example, in gaming contexts the researcher identity could be

included in one's character description, on social media in the profile description, etc. Ideally, a research blog or website should provide the objectives, the teams, the institutional affiliations, and contacts. This channel should also be gradually updated with research results and used as a tool for returning results and collecting feedback from participants (member checking).

Risks are considered higher in the case of research involving sensitive data or vulnerable participants, while they are considered lower when data aggregation makes it difficult to identify individuals.

However, the principle of aggregation that would protect anonymity by (thus not requiring informed consent), has been shown to be unfounded in digital contexts.

In 2008, a group of researchers made public a dataset that contained profile data from several Facebook accounts of an entire cohort of students at a U.S. university. Although procedures were applied to anonymize the personal data with related removal of the students' names and IDs, of the university of origin and cultural interests, the data were easily re-identified revealing the fragility of the alleged privacy of the subjects under study (Zimmer, 2010).

Some consider informed consent to be unnecessary due to the digital consent given by those who share information in public digital spaces. However, problems arise in relation first to the awareness of users who often automatically consent to the release of their personal information and only rarely change their privacy settings. The informed consent model is based on participants' autonomy, competence, and ability to understand risks, all assumptions challenged by digital information. Acceptance of the platforms' terms of use may not meet the criteria for informed consent, as the often vague language alluding to "use for research" does not involve disclosure of the specific elements relevant to a particular research program.

Consent given in platforms is also contextual in nature. Information that is disclosed for example on social media is expected to remain within those spaces. Think, for example, of a borderline case or an emergency or crisis situation (environmental disasters for example) where some people might share personal information to ask for help or help other people. The disclosure of this information should be protected, it needs to remain within the original context and not exploited for research purposes (Crawford and Finn, 2014).

To complicate the process, there is the difficulty for the researcher himself or herself to anticipate future risks and potential negative consequences of the research for participants.

Informed consent becomes somewhat problematic and obsolete in digital contexts where it is anachronistic to require people to sign a form as a sine-qua-non condition for participating in research. In addition to the unfeasibility of this when there are many participants, signing a form also becomes potentially risky.

In addition, the time aspect must be considered. First, signing on a form cannot cover a person's consent for the entire period of his or her engagement in a group. Digital groups, communities and contexts are very dynamic and continually subject to member changing (the access of new members for example who may not have signed the distributed informed consent prior to their joining the group). Second, keeping participants informed about the research is an ongoing imperative which does not end with a signed consent form.

The concept of consent should be readapted to digital contexts and conceived more as dynamic rather than static, as a process of continuous exchange and negotiation, a process that needs to be modulated in relation to the evolution of the situation, contingencies in the field, changes in memberships, attendances and absences, and expectations of participants. Even when feasible, informed consent is not enough because it needs to be considered both the direct and the indirect violation of anonymity. Written permission by one participant does not resolve the issue of indirectly violating anonymity for those in the participant's social network. In netnography the identification of a participant often implies the identification of his/her friends, relatives, groups, colleagues, etc. This is an unethical practice. Thus, even when informed consent is possible and participants consent to be identified, it may be appropriate to maintain anonymity to preserve participant's social network from unforeseen consequences (Boellstoorff, Nardi, Taylor, 2012).

5. ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Anonymity and confidentiality are often contemplated together, although they refer to different concepts. Both are basic requirements of social research.

Confidentiality refers to access to personal information by the researcher alone and the assurance that it will not be accessible by anyone but the researcher while anonymity is about ensuring the non-identification of the person from the research data through removing sensitive and personal identifiable information such as names or personal codes.

In digital contexts where data mining technologies can easily link participants to the information they produce through different devices and in different contexts, anonymity and confidentiality are continuously challenged.

Although the use of pseudonyms is considered to be enough to ensure confidentiality, the publication of pseudonyms or nicknames could put anonymity at risk. A pseudonym could also coincide with the person's real name without the researcher's knowledge. Even if it does not coincide with the real name, it could contain part of the name and members of a group or community could still identify the person through it. As Bruckman (2004) points out, participants might use the same pseudonym over a very long-time span, in different contexts and platforms in which they alternatively might reveal personal information that, when combined and reassembled (when, for example, stored in databases), might end up identifying the person.

It might therefore be useful to also change the nicknames of participants in research reports using invented pseudonyms but still semantically close to the original ones.

Such a process may be more or less time-consuming. It is somewhat time-consuming, for example, in virtual worlds where participants often have extraordinarily creative pseudonyms for which finding equivalents that maintain the creative dimension without violating identity is difficult.

While anonymizing data and changing people's names, narratives could still be searchable and linkable to people through relational databases. Someone calls this traceability, instead of anonymity (Beaulieu and Estalella, 2012). The searchable and relational nature of digital environments poses problems perhaps particularly for ethnographers whose goal is to give voice to participants often "in their own words". Recognizing such risks might require difficult compromises such as the need to sacrifice ethnographic details and accuracy of accounts to preserve participants.

Obviously, the more sensible is the topic (such as when the research concerns vulnerable, invisible or stigmatized populations who might be endangered by the disclosure of their identities), the more important is to guarantee anonymity.

Think, for example, of political activists who might face legal repercussions or nonregulatory sexualities whose identity disclosure might involve unintentional outing, the revelation of orientations without the person's knowledge or will.

Therefore, digital information cannot, under any circumstances, be considered as information that is publicly available and readily usable by

anyone and for any purpose.

Ethical decisions must be adjusted on a case-by-case basis depending on the type of platform, the sensitivity of the topic being investigated, and the potential risks to participants (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, Cui, 2009; Varis, 2014).

The greatest risks are obviously related to the violation of the privacy of those involved. This is not only an issue related to the protection of sensitive data per se but also to the consequences that could result from such disclosure such as stalking, discrimination, black-mailing, or identity theft (Gross and Acquisti, 2005).

The example of netnography in dangerous contexts may help to clarify the point. Research on authoritarian regimes and/or during violent conflicts may have severe consequences for participants, should them be identified as members of armed forces, opposition movements, dissidents and therefore persecuted by the police, become targets for paramilitary groups or accused of revealing secret information, being traitors or spies. Consequently, protecting the identity of participants must be given top priority (Malthaner, 2014).

Direct risks are compounded by indirect risks when research findings are used for other purposes such as, for example, targeted advertising campaigns, mass manipulation, or political propaganda, as the Cambridge Analytica case (a data mining analysis firm able to access personal details of 50 million of Facebook users without their direct permission) has shown.

6. ETHICAL CHOICES

Some ethical strategies can minimize the risks highlighted in the previous paragraphs.

For example, in a netnographic research on a community of sexy selfie enthusiasts on Tumblr.com (Tiidenberg, 2018), a public space with publicly accessible content, the researcher by discussing with participants noted that they perceived that context as private and intimate. This combined with the sensitive content (sexuality and nudity) prompted the author to request informed consent. However, she did not limit herself to a general request for consent at the beginning of the study, but activated a dynamic path to consent by requesting it at each new stage of the research and each new "use" of the images (e.g., for presentations and publications). It was also beneficial the creation of a blog by the researcher in which to communicate the results and interpretations of the

research and collect feedback from participants (*member checking*). In addition, in order to protect participants' privacy, which is all the more necessary in contexts where the public and private are difficult to distinguish, the authors proposed composite narratives, fictional narratives, and remix techniques to avoid identification and re-identification of participants. For example, they changed all images into pencil sketches that retained visual details while reducing recognizability. They reassembled the narratives by avoiding direct quotes from the web and making sure (through Google cross-searching) that the altered texts could no longer be traced back to the blog from which they came.

Being interested in digital activism and the ways in which it is able to connect the public square with the digital sphere, Barbosa (Milan and Barbosa, 2020) conducted a digital ethnography on a leftist activist group on WhattsApp - #UnidosContraOGolpe (UCG) created during the controversial impeachment of President Rousseff in Brazil. It was a closed group with invitation-only access created at the initiative of a citizen and soon became a space for discussion, expression of outrage, proposals for alternative scenarios, and mobilization. The researcher managed to gain access to the group through direct knowledge of some of the participants, and as soon as he entered, he posted a message informing members of the research and announcing that some of them would be invited for an interview at a later stage. Recording no opposition, he considered this a "green light". Through his active participation in group discussions, he began to build a trusting relationship that, like the admission, was facilitated by previous knowledge of some group members and was thus quickly considered a full member. However, the researcher was aware of the dynamic nature of group accesses on WhattsApp and the fact that continuously new users may join, some may drop out, not everyone participates assiduously, etc. He therefore occasionally chose to send a reminder about the research. He also made an informal commitment to the group as a spokesperson at public meetings to present the research results. Such public meetings were co-constructed so that over time the group members legitimized him as their "voice" in academia.

In a netnographic research on intimate relationships with robots and dolls, the researcher decides not to disclose the exact name of the forum that represents the major context of observation and for which he uses as the fictional name Prominent Doll website. He openly discloses his role of researcher to the administrators, also sending them the whole research design. After receiving administrators' consent, he actively participated in content production by publishing posts and sending private messages

to various members, but always reiterating his role as an outsider researcher (outsider to the community and not a sex doll owner). Also contributing to overt his role was his institutional bio with real name and institutional contacts. As an additional ethical consideration and given the sensitivity of the topic and the stigmatization of the community under study, the author also decided to change the nicknames of both people and their dolls (Hanson, 2021).

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this paper, we can say that the ethical controversies to which netnography exposes are significant and certainly not exhaustively contained in this paper. For while it is difficult to exhaustively list the challenges that different netnographic research may face, it is equally so to standardize and discipline solutions for these dilemmas.

With reference to the first dilemma (text versus people) we opt for a balanced position by considering digital data as texts under the agency of people which can do harm.

The difficulty in distinguishing between public and private settings leads to overcoming the legal public/private dichotomy to concentrate on the emic perception of participants and their definition of the content as public or private.

The decision between covert or overt access to the field needs to be ethically grounded by considering the inclusiveness of the field and being prepared to sacrifice accuracy if required.

What matter for netnograhy is the digital representation and not its physical or real correspondence.

The paper highlighted challenges to the traditional nature of consent and anonymization, the need for respecting expectations of privacy, the contextual nature of ethics. Concerns over consent, privacy, anonymity do not disappear simply because participants interact and discuss in public space. Instead, they became even more important and complex.

Neither the delineation of something as public or private, as true or false, as legitimate or not, nor informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality are obvious in digital context.

I have certainly not succeeded with this paper in providing an unambiguous ethical procedure that can be considered correct because I believe there is no formula other than reflexivity that requires the researcher to continually question not only the process of observation but also its consequences.

Ethical challenges require researchers to develop reflexivity about choices and how they will impact the outcome, whether they will affect and in which way the people we seek to represent and to reflexively and flexibly adapt to the context.

It is our responsibility as researchers to raise questions but also to ensure that our methods and procedures remain rooted in long-standing ethical practices.

No regulations or codes of conduct imposed from the outside may help to carry out ethical research. Instead, it is important to shift from a top down to a bottom-up logic, interrogating our methods from the inside in: "reflexively interrogating one's methods of inquiry shifts attention away from codes of conduct imposed from the outside and reveals hidden ethical practices from the inside" (Markham, 2006: 39).

The ethical focus must shift from mere consideration of the data collected to the entire process: all decisions in netnographic research - from the questions asked, methods of defining field boundaries, accessing participants, collecting, organizing, interpreting the information - are ethical decisions. Moreover, how the ethnographer analyzes, categorizes, represents and interprets (sub)cultural identities or cultural practices influences how they will be perceived, understood in the academy and outside it by readers, students, policy-makers and others. This expands the ethical dimension to the entire netnographic process.

Dynamic informed consent (where possible), altered quotations so that they cannot be backward traces in search engines, anonymizing and pseudonymizing people assumes a huge importance for vulnerable populations and sensitive topics, as the examples demonstrate.

The ethical principles emerging from this discussion call for ethical consideration of vulnerable populations or topics, for balancing people's rights and expectations with the social benefits of research, for considering ethics in the entire research process and not only in the dissemination of results. In one word, by highlighting dilemmas, the paper attempts to establish the moral authority for self-regulation.

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