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How to Use Ethnographic Methods With Instagram

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How to Use Ethnographic Methods With Instagram



Learning Outcomes

By the end of this guide, readers should be able to:

- Conceptualize Instagram as an ethnographic “fieldsite”
- Understand the affordances of Instagram
- Develop ethnographic practices on Instagram
- Discuss key ethical considerations when using Instagram for ethnographic methodology

Introduction

Doing research amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the necessity of adapting academic research methods for digital spaces. Today, digital platforms provide infrastructure where communities are formed, revolutions are waged, business is conducted, and performances are staged. This guide offers an entry point for researchers interested in using Instagram as a site for ethnographic study. Readers are invited to reconceptualize what constitutes a “fieldsite” and are provided tools for how to adapt ethnographic placemaking for digital landscapes. The guide also overviews some of the key features of Instagram, highlighting what digital affordances the platform allows as far as anthropological inquiry is concerned, and provides ethnographic strategies and methodological practices readers can employ when they begin their own projects. Finally, together we will consider key ethical considerations which will be necessary for any aspiring Instagram

ethnographer.

Reconceptualizing the Anthropological Fieldsite

Historically, anthropologists and ethnographers alike have traveled the world to conduct ethnographic research, that is, the long-term immersive qualitative study of cultures and phenomena. Such endeavors have typically taken the form of in-person journeys to distant places, often situating the anthropologist's fieldsite within a single, geographically bounded space. In 1986, anthropologists [Marcus and Fischer \(1986\)](#) noted the growing interest in anthropology to represent "the embedding of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy" (, p. 77). In her piece "The Fieldsite as Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research," Jenna [Burrell \(2016\)](#) notes that such widespread interest in global systems and processes contributed to a distorted view of the cultures being studied, as the representation of "culture within a small, bounded space, such as a village, was...increasingly less accurate" (p. 52). By the 1990s, the internet as an object of research was recognized as an "entirely new category of space" ([Burrell, 2016, p. 5353](#)). [Burrell \(2016\)](#) reconceptualizes the fieldsite as something less geographically bounded, offering instead the notion of a fieldsite as a network composed of "fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects" (p. 55). This framework can be used as a way to understand how people move between and are impacted by their online/offline worlds.

In her work on ethnographic placemaking, [Pink \(2009\)](#) argues that ethnographic places are not bounded by location or geography, they are a collection of intertwined things. Consider this question for a moment: what makes a fieldsite? Is it

a town? But what is a town, except a series of roads, a concentration of buildings and homes, created through a series of political and social processes? Ask yourself: who's in a fieldsite? Who are the people and what connects them? As an ethnographer, it is useful to first consider what your fieldsite needs in order to answer the questions you have.

For over four decades, anthropologists have been building a body of ethnographic work which examines digital space as an object for research and a tool to research with. Early anthropological inquiry on the internet concerned itself primarily with understanding the consequences the internet had on social life. Given the immersive nature of the ethnographic method, digital anthropologists have produced scholarship pertaining to methods of doing ethnography on and with the internet ([Hine, 2015](#); [Postill & Pink, 2012](#)). Ultimately, this scholarship continues to shape the anthropological interest in the internet as a dynamic and compelling place and space that is shaping our social, political, and economic worlds.

The first step to doing ethnography with Instagram is to do some reflection. Spend a few minutes writing down why you think Instagram is an important site for your research. Is there a concentration of people, things, ideas, or visuals on Instagram that is pertinent to your study? [Miller et al. \(2018\)](#) note that “the digital is not an abstraction but rather the creation of a plethora of quite concrete forms and processes” (p. 2). What are the forms and processes happening specifically on Instagram that you are focusing on? Are there other places (digital or physical) which might be useful fieldsites for your study? Once you spend some time reflecting on these questions, the next step is to understand what Instagram is and how best to utilize it for research.



Section Summary

- With the turn of the 20th century, the internet prompted anthropologists to reconceptualize the fieldsite away from a static geographic space, toward a multidimensional heterogeneous collection of networks.
- Fieldsites are multidimensional concentrations of people, things, ideas, and processes.
- A first step to doing ethnography with Instagram is to reflect on why Instagram is an important site for your research.

Using Instagram as Your Fieldsite

As a researcher interested in doing ethnography online, it is important to understand the context and affordances of the platform on which your research is conducted. An affordance is defined as “the range of possible activities” on any given platform ([Norman, 1999, p. 41](#)). In this section, we will explore the history of Instagram and learn about some of the affordances that constitute it.

Instagram occupies a distinct space in the social media landscape because of its visual focus ([Leaver et al., 2020](#)). Instagram is a social media platform which hinges on its striking visual nature as described in [Leaver et al.'s \(2020\)](#) book *Instagram* which contextualizes the emergence and growth of the Instagram platform. Founded in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, this long aimed to be a place app was originally inspired by location-based check-in apps, like Four-Square ([Leaver et al., 2020, p. 9](#)). Instagram launched on October 6, 2010, on

the Apple App Store and allowed “instant photography within a square frame (images could *not* be loaded from the phones’ gallery), with a series of filters to add different stylistic feels to images, and the ability for followers to like or comment on each image” ([Leaver et al., 2020, p. 10](#)). Since the launch, the company has undergone many internal and external changes, the largest being the one billion dollar buy-out by Facebook, made official in April 2012 ([Leaver et al., 2020, p. 11](#)). Despite these shifts, the immediacy of communication through photography has always been a mainstay of the platform’s vision and success.

Instagram occupies a unique corner in the social media market because of its entanglement in our daily lives. [Frier \(2020\)](#) writes, “Instagram has become a tool to measure cultural relevance, whether it’s in a school, in an interest-based community, or in the world” (p. xvii). Instagram has long aimed to be a platform about “creativity, design, and experiences” (p. 83), built on what [Frier \(2020\)](#) aptly identifies as the intersection of capitalism and ego (p. xvii). On Instagram, people post to “attract the adoration of an audience” and the platform privileges content that is “beautiful, well designed, or inspirational” ([Frier, 2020](#), p. 80).

Given its popularity, Instagram has become the virtual home to a plethora of internet communities. Its visual nature offers users a way to perform their everyday life through “lifestreaming”—that is, the practice of sharing the everyday moments of a person’s life consistently on a platform ([Marwick, 2013](#)). Lifestreaming on Instagram is common due to the affordances of the platform. As an ethnographer, you might be able to witness the small everyday practices of users through their posts, stories, and shares.

Instagram has several affordances worthy of exploration. The first is hashtags. Hashtags are labels assigned to particular content that automatically tie it to other content that shares the hashtag label. This is the most indicative means of determining a group's identity on Instagram, as well as in other online spaces. Through hashtags, users are able to visualize what constitutes a certain identity-group's content, ideas, trends, and opinions, as well as what individual users identify with it. Through this visualization, the boundaries of the community are also given definition.

Next, the Stories feature of Instagram offers users quick and easy ways to post content that reveals more about their everyday lives. Stories can be used to engage with followers through the use of polls, question boxes, and reactions. In general, Stories include less formal curation as they disappear after 24 hours and are often used for livestreaming everyday moments from a person's day or experiences. For those using Stories in their data collection, screenshotting is necessary to preserve content for later analysis. It is also worth noting that all of Instagram's content can be posted across-platforms (most easily to Facebook) and researchers may find cross-platform engagement productive and, in many cases, necessary to fully examine their research questions.

The bookmarking feature is another useful tool for researchers inside the platform. This is a function that allows users of the site to save posts in folders, effectively grouping content according to their own preferences. Bookmarking can enable one to begin to "code" one's observations in a qualitative method. While bookmarking is a good first step, readers are also advised to screenshot their data and save it to a secure database, in case any of the content is removed from the plat-

form prior to analysis.



Section Summary

- An “affordance” is a range of possible activities allowed on a given platform or fieldsite.
- Instagram holds a unique ground in the online communities for its predominantly visual nature.
- Instagram’s “hashtag” feature makes it easily transferable to ethnographic study. Hashtags offer researchers to explore content shared with a common theme or purpose (as collated by the hashtag). They can be especially useful for researchers looking to explore a bounded topic or group.
- Instagram’s “Stories” feature offers researchers unique access to everyday moments and informal content.
- Instagram’s “bookmarking” feature makes it useful and conducive to digital ethnography and archiving. Researchers can save posts using the bookmarks into folders based on themes of their choosing. Still, you should not only rely on bookmarks for data archiving, as the bookmarks function only works for the content present on the app; if any content is deleted, it will also be removed from your bookmarked folders.

Conducting Ethnography on Instagram

In this section, you will learn a few key steps necessary to begin an ethnographic research practice using Instagram. Ethnography is, in a general sense, an immer-

sive method in which an ethnographer spends an extended period participating, observing, and building relationships with a community of people, things, or ideas to answer a set of research questions. In this method, the researcher's subjectivity and positionality are present and acknowledged throughout the process. In their book "Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method," [Boellstorff et al. \(2012\)](#) write "ethnographers produce work of high validity from situated engagement in the field" (p. 41). This often requires a period of fieldwork over the course of months and sometimes years where "immersive data collection, and the rigorous contextual, historical embedding of the analysis" is embarked upon ([Boellstorff et al., 2012](#)). Because of this, a central component of doing ethical ethnographic research is to engage in a process of critical reflection on your position as a researcher and the impact your presence has on the community and the research itself. In her book "Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday," [Hine \(2015\)](#) notes that reflexivity in the ethnographic process is "an important corrective to an erroneous impression that ethnographers somehow produce objective accounts of pre-existing reality" (p. 81). She reminds internet ethnographers to pay attention to the choices they make in constructing and interacting with their fieldsite ([Hine, 2015](#)).

The data ethnographers collect is often based on participant-observation which is "the embodied emplacement of the researching self in a fieldsite as a consequential social actor" ([Boellstorff et al., 2012](#)). Ethnographers also use in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, historical research, and media analysis in their data collection. Throughout fieldwork, ethnographers produce documents called field notes which are thorough documentation of the research process and experience

to produce “thick description” ([Geertz, 1973](#)) in the analysis and writing up stages of the research ([Emerson et al., 1995](#)). Writing fieldnotes is also useful space to document and reflect on the agency you have as an ethnographer in constituting what is and is not present in your research processes.

Doing ethnographic fieldwork on Instagram can begin with the construction of a researcher’s digital profile. This is necessary not only to be able to use and access the Instagram app but to be able to position yourself in the community. On Instagram, the creation of a profile requires that one upload a photo of themselves, create a short bio, and consider posting some photos with captions to the grid, introducing themselves. As many internet ethnographers have noted, presenting your ethnographic self requires some thoughtfulness ([Boellstorff et al., 2012](#)). Furthermore, [Boellstorff et al. \(2012\)](#) also note that you must first spend time observing the norms of the online community you are studying. This will allow you to create a digital profile that will be legible to the community you are engaging with. You may want to consider creating a distinct “research-account” from your personal or already-existing Instagram account. The separation of one’s personal account from the account that will be used for the ethnographic practice is useful inasmuch as it allows you to curate what you are seeing to be specific to your research topic, by following only relevant actors and hashtags researchers will be able to fully immerse themselves in online community they are researching. Additionally, having a separate research account will assist researchers in practicing necessary boundaries for when and how the research is conducted.

Next, you can begin constructing what [Bluteau \(2021\)](#) calls a “coherent digital network.” On Instagram, this requires understanding the boundaries of the online

community you are studying. Who are the key figures in the community? What hashtags are commonly used? Such an understanding comes from searching for, following, and interacting with relevant accounts. In his digital ethnography on bespoke tailors in London and social media, [Bluteau \(2021\)](#) exemplifies this practice by following more and more people and engaging with their content by liking and commenting on posts ([Bluteau, 2021](#)). Given that the basis of ethnographic research is participant-observation, liking and commenting is one way to establish familiarity with those you are interested in researching. Over time, you should aim to produce a network of accounts which are uniformly relevant to your community of interest. [Bluteau \(2021\)](#) notes his network contained a “broad selection of individual accounts; however it was clear that they all interacted with each other and this web of interactions held the amorphous network together” (p. 270). Using your research account, you can also post your own content to begin the process of participant-observation. This might mean reposting relevant content or creating your own posts relevant to the community you are studying. Because Instagram communities interact with one another through posting and dialoguing on those posts, creating your own content can be a particularly useful way to do participant-observation in your research community and begin the process of meeting potential interlocutors.

Still, researchers should be careful to create careful boundaries around their Instagram use in this phase, as the process of trying to create a coherent digital network can easily lead one to spend hours of scrolling and following. Once you have established yourself as an actor in the digital community, the process of ethnographic fieldwork can unfold. As many have noted, the digital nature of our fieldsite

offers advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps, the most notable disadvantage is the blurring of “research” and “everything else.” For this reason, developing a structure of ethnographic practice is paramount. [Postill and Pink \(2012\)](#) offer suggestions for this in their piece, “Social media ethnography: The digital researcher in a messy web.” They suggest the following system for creating and maintaining an ethnographic practice online which they call overlapping subpractices: “catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting, and archiving” ([Postill & Pink, 2012](#)). They outline each subpractice as follows:

- *Catching up* includes keeping up with research-related developments online (in places such as Facebook and Twitter), through face-to-face encounters, mailing lists, and other news sources. This gives the researcher a chance to keep up to date with their research topic
- *Sharing* is often entwined with catching up and can include reposting or sharing relevant content which they find through catching up. Sharing allows the researcher the chance to begin relationship building through shared dialogue of the content, and through establishing a familiarity with potential research participants.
- *Exploring* includes short or sometimes more meandering explorations of potential research sites. On Instagram, this could include scrolling hashtags, clicking on tagged accounts, or following linked content to other web-based pages. [Postill and Pink \(2012\)](#) advise framing these forays as “short exploratory trips” (p. 7).
- *Interacting* can be as small as liking a post or as extended as a conversation in the Direct Message function with an interlocutor. By interacting with an array of interlocutors at differing degrees, the research is able to create both “strong” and “weak” ties with the community.

- *Archiving* is a crucial practice in digital anthropology, given the wealth of data posted online. Researchers can develop codes or themes to bookmark and screenshot the data they are seeing into folders. This allows them to organize and store their data in real-time. Some digital anthropologists consider this a part of their fieldnotes.

Ultimately, the researcher should create a consistent habit and schedule to perform these practices throughout their fieldwork. Forming a coherent and consistent way of interacting with their fieldsite is necessary to comprehend the speed at which ideas within the community change and evolve.



Section Summary

- Ethnography is an immersive method where the researcher is participating and observing in their fieldsite.
- Conducting ethnography on Instagram requires that one creates a personal account, complete with photo and bio.
- Conducting ethnography on Instagram requires that one constructs a coherent digital network by actively participating in the conversations, hashtags, and contributing to the community with the provision of personal content.
- The establishment of daily routines (catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting, and archiving) is important in conducting ethnographic research on Instagram to be witness to the ways new content posts, new members, and comments change the direction of the community.

- Participant observation can only occur once the researcher has established themselves as an active member of the community; a process which takes time.

Considerations for Ethical Ethnographic Practice on Instagram

Today, “research about online communication is fraught with ethical debate” ([Burles & Bally, 2018, p. 2](#)). Because much of what we observe and are immersed in on the internet is user-generated content, researchers must examine what and how to ethically research the content that is publicly accessible. This is especially important for those of us using Instagram as our fieldsite, given that the platform facilitates the widespread practice of livestreaming which often provides an extraordinary level of access into the intimate, private, and everyday domains of our interlocuters’ lives.

[Markham and Buchanan \(2012\)](#) worked with the Association of Internet Researchers Working Committee to propose several questions researchers and scholars of the internet should consider in conducting research, such as:

considering the nature of the data and its source; possible harms or benefits to online authors; and how data will be accessed, managed, and presented. In addition, they recommended that researchers engage with existing literature and continue to generate knowledge about ethical de-

cision-making in ever-expanding Internet contexts. (p. 3)

In addition to these questions, I implore readers to examine the role of consent in their research practice. When to obtain informed consent is also a topic of much debate in the digital anthropology community, and ultimately a one-size-fits-all rule does not apply. Notably, a wealth of scholars engaged in health-related internet research have examined the necessity of consent based on where the content fits into a public versus private framework. ([Mazanderani & Powell, 2013](#); [Seale et al., 2010](#)). Ask yourself, is the account you follow set to private? Does the content contain sensitive, personal, or intimate material? In the case that the accounts you are researching are public, scholars have agreed researching public content without informed consent can be ethical given that “individuals who share information and stories on publicly accessible websites without password requirements are likely aware that their posts might be read by others they do not know” ([Burles & Bally, 2018, p. 4](#)). Still, other scholars contend that authors should always ask for informed consent for the use of their online content to be included in the research ([Clark et al., 2015](#); [Markham, 2012](#)).

It is my personal position that obtaining informed consent to conduct research with your research participants and their online content is necessary for ethical ethnographic practice. Unlike some qualitative research, as ethnographers, our aim is to be immersed and in relationship with the communities and cultures we are studying. Doing so without introducing yourself, building relationships and boundaries for your role as a researcher, and asking for permission to do so, in my view, is inherently unethical. Furthermore, researchers should be considerate of how their own positionality and presence in the community impacts and interacts their data

collection process. To do ethnography is to be involved in the community and so a consistent and critical reflection who you are and why you are doing the research is of the utmost importance.



Section Summary

- Most content on the internet is generated by users.
- Ethical questions to consider when conducting research on the internet:
 - What is the nature of data and its source?
 - What are the possible benefits and harms of online authors?
 - How data is accessed, managed, presented, and by whom?
 - Who is included/excluded from access?
 - What is the existing literature what are the precedents for decision-making in new contexts?
- Obtaining informed consent is a crucial step in doing ethical ethnographic research.

Conclusion

Today digital platforms, more than ever, provide infrastructure where communities are formed, and culture is being made. This guide has presented some preliminary considerations and methodological strategies for how Instagram can be utilized to do ethnography. As ethnographers, our task is to mould our methods to the contexts, contents, and questions which guide our research. The reconceptualization

of digital and online communities as legitimate fieldsites are necessary for the continuation of anthropological inquiry in an increasingly digital world.

Doing ethnography on any social media platform, including Instagram, requires researchers to spend ample time participating on the platform as a member of the community. This guide outlines strategies for beginning ethnographic practices on Instagram. These include situating yourself and your positionality as a researcher, setting up a public research Instagram account, introducing yourself as an ethnographer to the community, gaining informed consent, developing a consistent schedule for engagement with the community, and creating a cohesive network to follow and observe. Over time ethnographers should seek to use these strategies to conduct participant-observation in their fieldsite, writing fieldnotes, connecting with research participants, and exploring the nuances of their fieldsite along the way. Ultimately, readers are advised to use this guide as a jumping-off point and not as a prescription for ubiquitous ethnographic practice. Developing a successful ethnographic practice requires time and consistency. It can feel daunting to establish a rapport with an online community, but the first step, as with any ethnographic research, is to start by saying hello.



Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Which of the following statements about a fieldsite is FALSE?

- ☐ a. A fieldsite is the place where ethnographic research takes

place



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.



b. A fieldsite must be located in physical, geographical space



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.



c. A fieldsite may be a village, town, or a collection of ideas



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

2. Which of the following is not considered a pre-requisite to the undertaking of an ethically conducted ethnography focusing on a digital or online community?

☐ a. The creation of a personal account within the community



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

☐ b. Participation in the community with content, likes, shares, and explorations



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

- ☐ **c.** That the researcher conduct their research in secret, without anybody's knowledge or consent

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

3. Which of the following is NOT one of the daily subpractices proposed by Postil and Pink for ethnographers undertaking to research digital/online communities?

- ☐ **a.** Catching up and exploring with the members of their community

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.



b. Sharing and liking posts/content

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.



c. Creating fake accounts to subvert and undermine the goals of the community

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

4. Which of the following is NOT one of the questions proposed by Markham and Buchanan for researchers to consider when conducting digital ethnography?

☐ a. How will content be used/accessed by viewers?



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.



☐ b. What is the nature of the data presented and its source?



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

- ☐ **c.** How can the subject of study be manipulated to make the researcher famous?



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

SUBMIT

CLEAR

START OVER

Further Reading

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Web Resources

Authenticity and Digital Intimacy Between Influencers and Researchers: <https://digitaletnography.at/2021/02/15/authenticity-and-digital-intimacy-between-influencers-and-researchers/>

Digital Anthropology: <http://serious-science.org/digital-anthropology-8688>

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