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Researching online communities: systematic review of netnography in journalism studies

Investigación de comunidades en línea: revisión sistemática de la netnografía en los estudios de periodismo

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KEYWORDS

Netnography
Digital journalism
Journalism research
Systematic literature review
Online communities

ABSTRACT

Virtuality has established itself as a central social space, giving rise to new forms of relationships and the formation of communities that transcend interpersonal communication. In this context, developing specific methodologies for this emerging trend has become essential in social science research. One of the most prominent is netnography, a qualitative method developed, among others, by Robert V. Kozinets, which is well suited to understanding the cultural characteristics of digital communities. Although its use is widespread in fields such as marketing and tourism, it was necessary to map its presence in journalism studies. This article presents a systematic review of the literature examining the current state of netnography in journalism research, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A total of 74 articles were analyzed based on a search of the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The study reveals three main findings: first, a limited and fragmented adoption of the method in journalism studies despite its methodological maturity; second, the persistence of ethical, methodological, and access-related challenges to digital platforms; and third, under-explored thematic areas that limit the understanding of digital journalism cultures and the dynamics of online communities linked to journalism. The results highlight the need to further explore the methodological potential of netnography for the study of digital journalism, through greater rigor in its implementation and an expansion of its empirical applications. This work contributes to journalism studies by providing a systematic and holistic assessment of the strengths, limitations, and opportunities of netnography as a methodological tool for understanding the transformations of journalism in the digital age, thus establishing a basis for future research that seeks to capture the complexity of contemporary journalistic practices in virtual environments.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Netnografía
Periodismo digital
Investigación de periodismo
Revisión sistemática de la literatura
Comunidades en línea

RESUMEN

La virtualidad se ha consolidado como un espacio social central, dando lugar a nuevas formas de relación y a la configuración de comunidades que trascienden la comunicación interpersonal. En este contexto, el desarrollo de metodologías específicas para esta tendencia emergente se ha vuelto esencial en la investigación en Ciencias Sociales. Una de las más destacadas es la netnografía, un método cualitativo desarrollado, entre otros, por Robert V. Kozinets, que resulta adecuado para comprender las características culturales de las comunidades digitales. Aunque su uso está ampliamente extendido en ramas como el márquetin o el turismo, resultaba necesario realizar un mapeo de su presencia en estudios de periodismo. Este artículo presenta una revisión sistemática de la literatura que examina el estado actual de la netnografía en la investigación sobre periodismo, siguiendo las directrices PRISMA 2020. A partir de la consulta de las bases de datos Scopus y Web of Science, se analizaron un total de 74 artículos. El estudio revela tres hallazgos principales: primero, una adopción escasa y fragmentada del método en estudios de periodismo a pesar de su madurez metodológica; segundo, la persistencia de desafíos éticos, metodológicos y relacionados con el acceso a plataformas digitales; y tercero, áreas temáticas poco exploradas que limitan la comprensión de las culturas digitales periodísticas y las dinámicas de las comunidades en línea vinculadas al periodismo. Los resultados evidencian la necesidad de profundizar en el potencial metodológico de la netnografía para el estudio del periodismo digital, mediante una mayor rigurosidad en su implementación y una expansión de sus aplicaciones empíricas. Este trabajo contribuye a los estudios de periodismo al proporcionar una evaluación sistemática y holística de las fortalezas, limitaciones y oportunidades de la netnografía como herramienta metodológica para comprender las transformaciones del periodismo en la era digital, estableciendo así una base para futuras investigaciones que busquen capturar la complejidad de las prácticas periodísticas contemporáneas en entornos virtuales.

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1. Introduction

The transformations that have taken place in recent years in social interaction, communication, and cultural construction have been particularly significant, driven by the widespread use of generative artificial intelligence. Virtual communities have established themselves as interrelated ecosystems in which millions of people construct identities, negotiate meanings, and develop complex cultural practices (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023) that are particularly interesting for research, posing significant methodological and ethical challenges. In this context, netnography responds to this quest by applying ethnographic principles to the systematic study of online cultures and communities, offering interpretive tools to understand how meaning is constructed in digital interactions.

1.1. From traditional ethnography to netnography

Ethnography, as a qualitative research method, has its roots in cultural and social anthropology, focusing on understanding people's different ways of life. However, its definition has evolved considerably since its origins. The foundations of modern ethnography were laid by Bronislaw Malinowski in the first chapter of Argonauts of the Western Pacific, where he articulated its methodological principles: prolonged immersion with the group being studied, mastery of the native language (if different from that of the researcher), the use of direct observation, the need to "capture the native point of view," the importance of theoretical support and empirical checks, thoroughness in recording information, and keeping a field diary (Malinowski, 1922).

Later, Claude Lévi-Strauss questioned ethnographic empiricism with the intention of better explaining cultural diversity and establishing the intellectual unity of humanity, elevating ethnography beyond a simple procedure of data collection and recording to emphasize that it should be an activity grounded in the analysis of complex conceptual structures (Lévi-Strauss, 1958). This structuralist perspective emphasized that ethnography is a particularly attractive technique for addressing complex and multifaceted concepts, such as culture, in a profound and descriptive way, compared to more reductive quantitative techniques (Hine, 2000).

It was precisely this ability that highlighted the need to adapt the ethnographic method to the emerging virtual world. As Hine (2000) explains, virtual ethnography is used as a mechanism to problematize the use of the internet: instead of being inherently sensitive, the internet acquires its sensitivity through use. Thus, this new form of ethnography is not "pure" but rather a methodological adaptation for understanding mediated interaction (Hine, 2000). Since the coronavirus pandemic in 2019, traditional dichotomies such as public and private, or physical and digital, have blurred (Allen-Perkins, 2022). This change, in addition to the rapid evolution of the digital space, has forced us to rethink the epistemological assumptions of ethnography, adopting more flexible versions that recognize constant interaction, the multiplicity of identities, and the acceleration of the digital environment (Bárcenas Barajas & Preza Carreño, 2019). In this context, virtual ethnography is intermittent, partial, and mobile, recognizing both the presence and absence of researchers and informants in media contexts (Hine, 2000).

Thus, netnography, a term coined by Robert V. Kozinets in 1998, experiments with an adaptation that combines "net" (network) with "ethnography" to refer to a method specifically designed to investigate online communities and cultures. Kozinets initially developed this approach in his research on fandom, marketing, and consumer communities on the internet (Amaral, 2010; Kozinets, 1998). Although its definition has evolved over time and with changes in the objects of study, the fundamental method used by netnographers to collect data remains participant observation, in which researchers immerse themselves in the lives of the groups, become one of their members, and participate in daily activities while observing. The fundamental difference is that their work takes place in a digital field, with the goal of understanding how culture and meaning are constructed in online interactions (Kozinets, 2023).

It is worth noting that since the coronavirus pandemic in 2019, traditional dichotomies such as public and private, or physical and digital, have blurred (Allen-Perkins, 2022). This change, in addition

to the rapid evolution of the digital space, has forced us to rethink the epistemological assumptions of ethnography, adopting more flexible versions that recognize constant interaction, the multiplicity of identities, and the acceleration of the digital environment (Bárcenas Barajas & Preza Carreño, 2019).

1.2. Characteristics and types of netnography

Netnography has undergone a remarkable evolution in online spaces, even developing into "immersive netnography," a recent format for studying virtual reality, the Metaverse, and augmented reality (Kozinets, 2023). Despite this diversification, all netnographic types share five fundamental characteristics that distinguish them as a rigorous method. First, they use related techniques for data collection, analysis, and representation that prioritize interpretive depth. Second, they emphasize and analyze the qualitative nature of context and content, treating digital artifacts as dense cultural texts. Third, they employ the phenomenological presence of the researcher in the sociotechnical experience, recognizing that the researcher is simultaneously an observer and a mediated participant. Fourth, they are governed by rigorous and frequently updated ethical procedures that address the complexities of consent and privacy in digital contexts. Finally, their ultimate purpose is to foster an understanding that encompasses cultural characteristics such as meanings, identities, hierarchies, and rituals (Kozinets, 2023).

It is important to distinguish netnography from other ethnographic approaches applied to digital contexts. Unlike "online ethnography" and "virtual ethnography," which often combine online and offline ethnographic techniques to understand digital behaviors from a holistic perspective, netnography is entirely web-based. Its concept and application are developed as a qualitative ethnographic research model applied specifically to virtual communities, which have become popular for facilitating communication between individuals and groups with common interests, making them a privileged source for the study and analysis of social behavior (Torres & Rendón, 2017). Therefore, the netnographic method is presented as a flexible, adaptable, and multi-method format, effective for researchers seeking to access the understanding and cultural keys of covert and unrepresentative social spheres that, nevertheless, find in virtuality a fertile space for their development and manifestation (Liccioni, 2022b).

The transformation of netnography has occurred in parallel with its object of study. Initially focused on studying defined online communities (forums, discussion groups, and virtual spaces with defined membership), the method has evolved to use digital traces scattered across social networks, blogs, and content platforms as its primary data source. This expansion responds to the recognition that social media is an undeniable source of data that serves to build cultural understanding in the age of technocultures (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). The vast amount of information contained in these platforms, together with their multimodal nature —text, image, video, metadata— makes netnography essential but also methodologically more complex (Garcia et al., 2018).

Researchers must reconceptualize fundamental ethnographic practices, such as prolonged immersion and participant observation, for contexts where interactions are archived, potentially massive, and shaped by opaque algorithmic systems. In addition, ethical tensions persist regarding informed consent, the distinction between public and private data, and the long-term visibility of data archived on digital platforms (Amaral et al., 2014; Bernard, 2004).

1.3. Netnography in communication studies

Although journalism studies still predominantly use traditional research methodologies such as interviews and content analysis, there has been an increase in the use of digital and computational methods, including network analysis, topic modeling, and machine learning, since 2010 (Fan et al., 2025). Furthermore, the use of Artificial Intelligence as both a tool and a subject of study has introduced new ethical challenges, including the lack of human context, the risk of algorithmic bias, and the need for constant supervision to ensure the quality and accuracy of results (Mateos Abarca & Gamonal Arroyo, 2024). In this case, triangulation is used to verify data and increase internal validity, making netnography an appropriate method through the combination of techniques such

as immersive data with investigative and/or interactive data (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2021; Kozinets, 2019; Torres Ruiz, 2021).

Therefore, although the relevance of netnography has already been demonstrated in the study of diverse fields such as political science, consumption, brand communities, corporate communication, and social media (Kaur et al., 2021; Kozinets, 1998; Liccioni, 2022), it is necessary to systematically explore its use and potential in communication research. Ethnography offers tools and mechanisms useful for research in journalism and communication, as it promotes a less hurried attitude and a way of engaging with the territory or field of study. In this way, both disciplines are characterized by their presence in the field, which implies constantly reviewing and reflecting on how knowledge and understanding of the facts under investigation are produced (Giménez Delgado, 2022). This is particularly interesting for overcoming the silences that perpetuate social invisibility (Giménez Delgado, 2022), so that, when combined, they constitute a very relevant component for investigating communities and communicative phenomena that lack significant academic research.

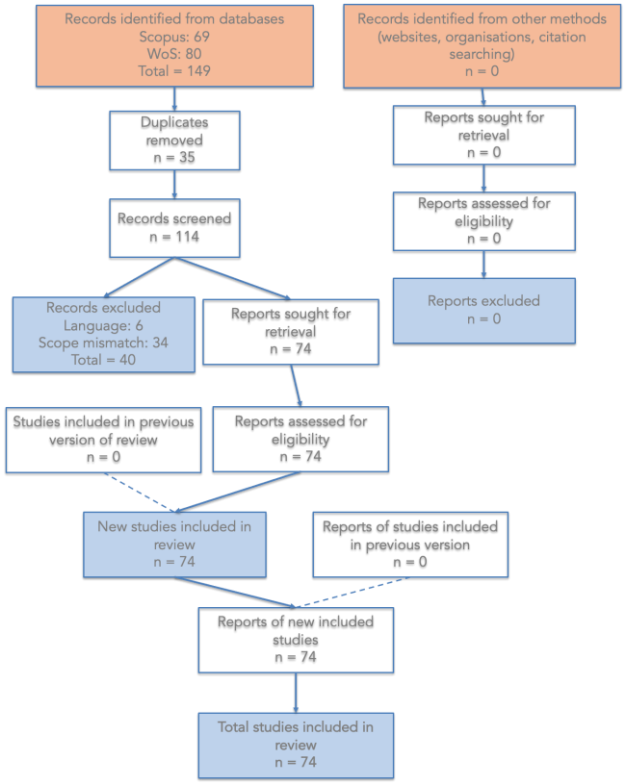
Given the landscape of methodological growth, diverse applications, and ongoing challenges, it is essential to conduct a systematic review that summarizes the current knowledge on netnography in communication research. The main goal of this review is to map, analyze, and synthesize the academic literature on the use of netnography in communication studies, highlighting thematic trends, methodological approaches, empirical applications, reported challenges, and research gaps.

2. Methodology

The main goal of the systematic review was to examine the literature on netnography in relation to journalism. Specifically, this review seeks to: (1) characterize the evolution of netnography as a research method in communication; (2) identify the main areas of application and objects of study where netnography has been used; (3) analyze methodological variations and combinations with other research methods; (4) synthesize its ethical, epistemological, and practical challenges; and (5) propose future directions for the development of the method and its application in communication research.

Methodologically, the systematic review provides transparency, rigor, and reproducibility, following the guidelines of Petticrew and Roberts (2006) and the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The work was carried out in three phases: development and filtering of search equations, elimination of duplicates and application of exclusion criteria, and systematic review of the final texts.

Figure 1
Steps in the study selection process using the flowchart based on PRISMA 2020



2.1. Phase 1. Development and initial filtering of search equations

First, the databases were selected based on the areas and topics of interest, resulting in Scopus and Web of Science (WOS). Scopus is a suitable tool for academic research due to its wide range of peer-reviewed journals, its ability to track citations, and its constant updating (Chaparro-Martínez et al., 2016). WOS, the oldest international bibliometric database, is characterized by its selective, structured, balanced, and up-to-date coverage (Birkle et al., 2020).

The search equations (*Table 1*) only used the term "netnography." However, other manifestations (such as virtual ethnography) also have a long history; they have been formalized as a synthetic method with perspectives that extend beyond traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2019, p. 8). For this reason, the search strategy prioritized this term to identify studies that explicitly adopt netnography as a methodological approach rather than broader ethnographic research conducted in digital settings.

It is true that this decision may have led to the omission of studies that use terminology derived from related fields, but priority has been given to including those that explicitly indicate this. Otherwise, the increase in the number of results could lead to studies that do not use netnography, increasing research noise. For that reason, different concepts related to journalism have been included to cover as many articles as possible, trying to mitigate the limitation related to the exclusive use of the term netnography.

Table 1
Search equations used to compile the corpus used in the systematic review

Scopus	Web of Science
TITLE-ABS-KEY (netnograph* AND (journalism OR journalist* OR "digital journalism" OR "online journalism" OR "news media" OR "newsroom*" OR "news production" OR "news content" OR "online news" OR "data journalism" OR "computational journalism" OR "automated journalism" OR "robot journalism" OR "AI journalism" OR "algorithmic journalism" OR "investigative journalism" OR "participatory journalism" OR "journalistic practice*" OR "press" OR "newspaper*" OR "news report*" OR "news coverage" OR "photojournalism" OR "audiovisual journalism" OR "broadcast journalism" OR "radio journalism" OR "television journalism" OR "digital media" OR "cyberjournalism")	TS=(netnograph* AND (journalism OR journalist* OR "digital journalism" OR "online journalism" OR "news media" OR "newsroom*" OR "news production" OR "news content" OR "online news" OR "data journalism" OR "computational journalism" OR "automated journalism" OR "robot journalism" OR "AI journalism" OR "algorithmic journalism" OR "investigative journalism" OR "participatory journalism" OR "journalistic practice*" OR "press" OR "newspaper*" OR "news report*" OR "news coverage" OR "photojournalism" OR "audiovisual journalism" OR "broadcast journalism" OR "radio journalism" OR "television journalism" OR "digital media" OR "cyberjournalism")

Source: Own elaboration

2.2. Phase 2. Duplicates elimination and development of exclusion criteria

Secondly, to perform the initial screening of the information, the data were downloaded automatically. The categories selected corresponded to the basic bibliographic metadata of the articles: author(s), title, abstract, number of authors, authors' affiliations, year of publication, journal, country, language, keywords, database(s), number of citations, and DOI.

Subsequently, duplicate articles were automatically removed using Excel, followed by a manual review to identify any additional duplicates that had not been detected. The final sample of duplicate articles amounted to 35.

In addition, the primary exclusion criterion was the removal of academic articles that did not align with the study's objective. Articles published in languages other than English or Spanish were also excluded. This decision was made in relation to the relevance of English as the dominant language of publication in indexed academic journals, which ensured comprehensive coverage of relevant literature (Zeng & Yang, 2024). On the other hand, Spanish has been included because of its widespread presence in journalism and communication studies, particularly in Ibero-American research.

Decisions regarding inclusion or exclusion were made independently by all authors. Elicit and Scispace were used as supporting tools to enhance reliability. When necessary, translations have been carried out using DeepL and reviewed by the authors.

2.3. Phase 3. Article analysis and reliability assessment

The analysis of the articles was conducted by two independent reviewers. Each study was systematically coded according to a predefined protocol covering multiple analytical dimensions. Descriptive analysis techniques were used to quantify trends, while qualitative content analysis was applied to synthesize narrative findings.

The final corpus consisted of 74 peer-reviewed articles addressing netnographic methodology and journalism. In line with PRISMA guidelines, a rigorous coding protocol was implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of the extracted data.

2.3.1. Coding protocol and dimensions

The coding protocol comprised 51 structured fields, coded as binary (TRUE/FALSE) to identify the presence or absence of each characteristic. They were organized into the following dimensions:

- **Thematic Areas**: Food, Well-being, Online communities, Consumption, Culture, Sports, Economy, Education, Gender, Marketing, Netnography, Participation, Journalism, Public policy, Social media and digital platforms, Religion, Public health, Technology, and Other.
- **Methodological Approach**: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed.
- **Nature of the Research**: Theoretical, Empirical, and Applied.
- **Data Collection Methods**: Content analysis, Discourse analysis, Thematic analysis, Focus group, Ethnography, Case study, Survey, and Interview.
- **Netnographic Design** (adapted from Paoli & D'Auria, 2025): Standalone and Bricolage.
- **Type of Digital Spaces** (adapted from Paoli & D'Auria, 2025): Public and restricted, Public and unrestricted, Semi-public and restricted, Semi-public and unrestricted, and Private and restricted.
- **Level of Analysis** (adapted from Paoli & D'Auria, 2025): Contextual and Meta-field.
- **Access and Observation Modalities** (adapted from Paoli & D'Auria, 2025): Covert access, Open access, Lurking, Simulated observation, Passive observation, Participant observation, and Autoethnography.
- **Additional Field**: Binary variable (Yes/No).

2.4. Reliability assessment

Finally, reliability was evaluated in two stages. First, a pilot phase was conducted with a sample of 20 articles, independently coded by both reviewers, with the objectives of developing the codebook, calibrating interpretive criteria, identifying discrepancies, and refining the coding protocol. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus-based discussion grounded in the coding protocol, textual evidence, and relevant theoretical frameworks.

Second, a consolidation phase was carried out using a random subsample of 18 articles (24,3% of the total corpus). Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a global value of $\kappa = 0.904$, indicating a high level of agreement and methodological robustness.

In addition, a qualitative reliability assessment was conducted for four interpretative fields requiring higher inferential judgment. A third independent reviewer classified agreement as disagreement, partial agreement, or full agreement. The results showed an 84% agreement rate (partial and full agreement combined), supporting the consistency of the interpretative coding process.

Overall, the implementation of a pilot phase followed by a consolidation phase represents a key methodological strength, consistent with PRISMA and Cochrane Collaboration recommendations for high-quality systematic reviews.

3. Results

The results are divided into sections: basic data of the articles, methodological characteristics and software, specific characteristics of netnography, and data used in the studies.

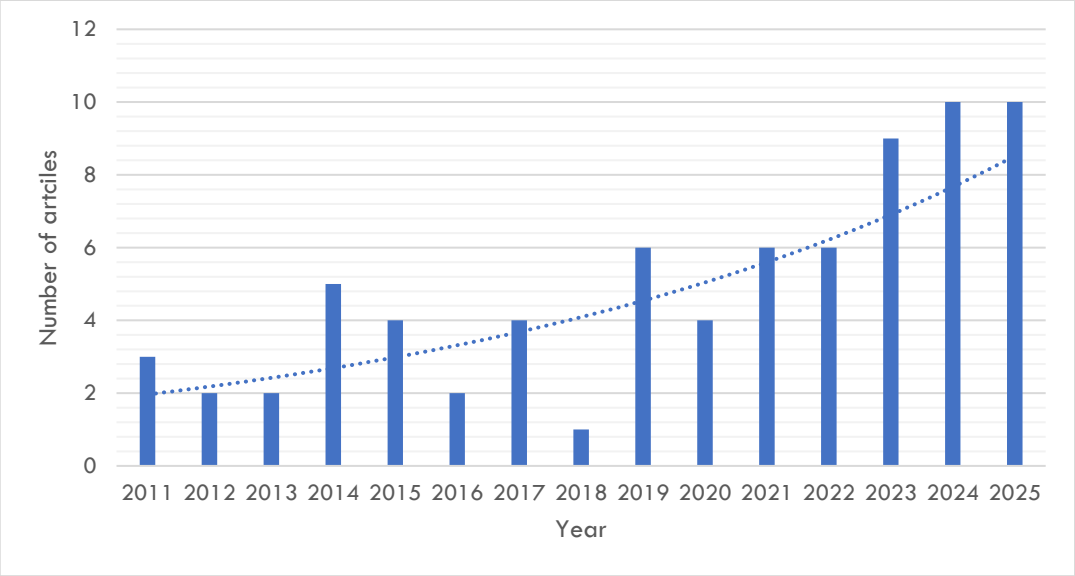
3.1. Basic data

Scientific output on the subject has not been constant (Figure 2). The exponential growth observed in the period 2020-2025, with 60,8% of publications concentrated in these years, confirms that netnography has reached a stage of maturity and academic consolidation. This phenomenon is not accidental but instead results from the convergence of several structural factors that have reshaped

the landscape of social research: (1) the ongoing digitization following the pandemic, (2) the formal acceptance of netnography as a credible methodology for various fields and studies, (3) the availability (though sometimes unstable) of digital data for research purposes, and (4) the creation of specialized analytical tools for digital data.

Figure 2

Progressive growth in netnography publications between 2011 and 2025



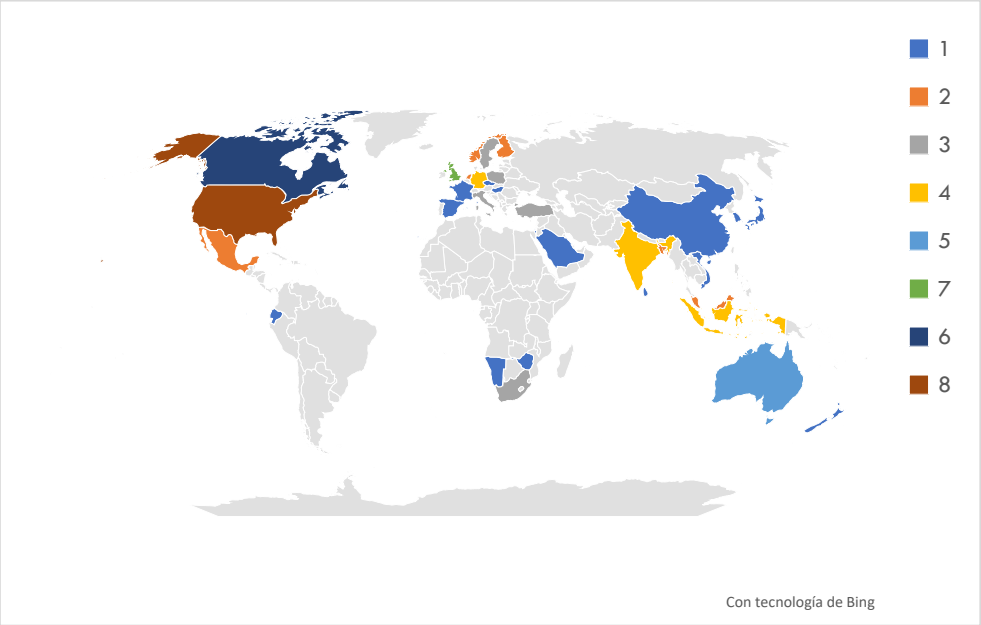
Because of this, three phases can be identified in this evolution: (1) initial phase (2011-2014), with 12 published studies (16,2%) focusing on methodological consolidation and primarily on marketing studies and consumer communities; (2) growth phase (2015-2019), with 17 published studies (23,0%), marked by disciplinary expansion, greater thematic diversification, and protocol refinement; and (3) acceleration phase (2020-2025), with 45 studies (60,8%), characterized by a surge in publications.

On the other hand, the total number of authors is 154, although the average number of authors per article is 2,27. Despite the wide variety of authors, only 43,24% of the articles include women as authors, with 44,59% of these being the first author. It should also be noted that no prolific authors were identified, as most have only one publication, which could indicate that netnography is still establishing itself as a common research method. This trend might continue to grow as AI becomes a more important research resource, potentially providing the human element increasingly valued in academia. Even so, it is worth noting that the author with the highest number of publications is Meghan Lynch, with only two articles (Lynch, 2014; Lynch et al., 2019).

In terms of affiliation, these are spread across 82 different countries, with the United States having the highest number. However, it should be noted that 56,76% of the articles are affiliated with non-Western countries, meaning that most of the academic output is located outside these environments. On the other hand, most of the analyzed articles are written in English (93,24%), showing a clear dominance over Spanish.

Figure 3

Number of articles published in each country of the authors' affiliation



Because of the variability between countries, a mapping of the academic ecosystem in which the analyzed articles were developed has been carried out. As can be seen in *Table 2*, the authors' academic entities have been identified. Thus, in line with what has been described above, Western countries such as the United Kingdom have many academic institutions. However, other countries, such as Indonesia, are beginning to catch up with a similar number.

Table 2

Complete list of academic institutions classified by country where the authors of netnography belong

Country	Institutions
Saudi Arabia	King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals
Australia	AUT University; University of the Sunshine Coast; Queensland University of Technology; University of Southern Queensland; University of Wollongong; University of Technology Australia
Bangladesh	University of Dhaka; North South University; University Dhaka
Canadá	Ryerson University; University of Ottawa; University of Toronto; Lakehead University
China	East China University of Science and Technology
Czech Republic	University of Finance and Administration; AGH University of Krakow
Ecuador	Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral
Spain	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Finland	Tampere University; University of Helsinki
France	Emlyon Business School

Germany	European University Viadrina; HafenCity University Hamburg; Hamburg University of Technology; Leibniz-Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning; Freie Universität Berlin
Hong Kong	The University of Hong Kong
Hungary	Corvinus University of Budapest
India	Jaipuria Institute of Management; MICA Ahmedabad; Symbiosis International University; XIM University
Indonesia	Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta; Universitas Islam Indonesia; Yogyakarta State University; Universitas Gadjah Mada; Universitas Islam Nahdlatul Ulama; Universitas Kiai Abdullah Faqih; UIN Sunan Kalijaga; UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya; Sebelas Maret University
Israel	Ben-Gurion University of the Negev; University of the Negev
Italy	Magna Græcia University; University of Salerno; Univ Gabriele d'Annunzio
Japan	Waseda University
Malaysa	Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia; Universiti Malaysia Sabah; Universiti Teknologi MARA; University of Malaya
Mexico	Tecnológico de Monterrey; Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila; Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León
Namibia	Namibia University of Science and Technology
Netherlands	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Wageningen University
Norway	University of Agder; Westerdals Oslo School of Arts, Communication and Technology
New Zealand	AUT University
Poland	University of Silesia in Katowice; Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz
Singapore	Nanyang Technological University
Sri Lanka	South Eastern University of Sri Lanka
South Africa	University of South Africa; University of Johannesburg; HSRC; Vega School of Brand Leadership
Sweden	Chalmers University of Technology; University of Gothenburg; Stockholm University; Jönköping University
Turkey	Akdeniz University; Yozgat Bozok University; Hatay Mustafa Kemal University; Selcuk University; Usak University
United Kingdom	Manchester Metropolitan University; Cardiff Metropolitan University; Bournemouth University; Teesside University; Newcastle University; University of Warwick; University of Cambridge

United States	University of Alabama; University of Arizona; University of Utah; University of Southern California; Fordham University; Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi
Vietnam	Vietnam National University; Van Lang University; Nguyen Tat Thanh University
Zimbabwe	Midlands State University

Source: Own elaboration

In this way, a geographical concentration can be observed in three areas: a) Anglo-American sphere: 18 studies (24,3%) were developed in English-speaking countries (USA, UK, Australia, Canada), highlighting the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon research tradition in international publications; b) European representation: There is a strong presence of Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Finland, reflecting diversity in European research traditions in netnography; c) Emerging markets: Notable contributions from Turkey, India, and Indonesia indicate growing non-Western perspectives and the geographical expansion of the field.

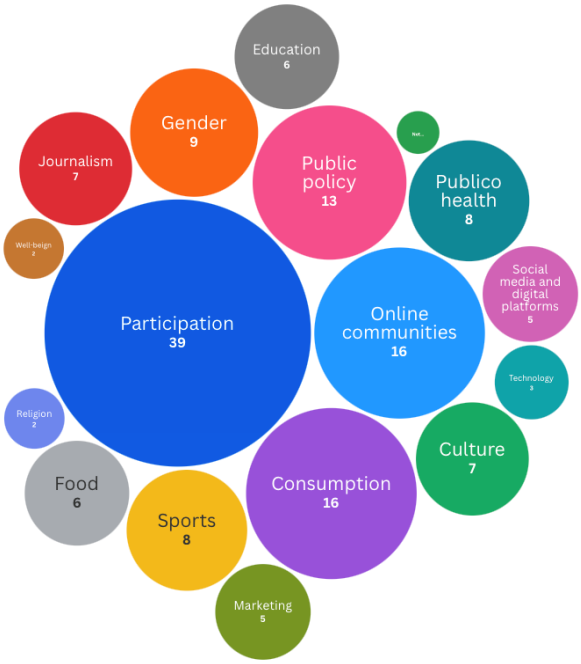
In another sense, for keyword analysis, a word cloud was created with the generative AI ChatGPT, which helped to identify the terms with the greatest presence. Thanks to this, it has been possible to verify that, as this research is related to a methodology applied to online contexts, it makes sense that those with the greatest presence are digital or media. Likewise, others, such as sport or food, stand out, which are intuited to be related to the topics of the articles. Otherwise, the word cloud has also reflected a wide range of words, indicative of netnography's great potential for adaptation across diverse topics.

Figure 4

Word cloud showing the variety of topics found in the keywords

The analysis revealed that the most recurrent thematic categories were Participation, Online Communities, and Consumption. All of these are closely related to netnography, since, as Kozinets (2019, p. 21) explains, this methodology emerged from consumer culture research, drawing on a brand studies perspective to investigate media fan communities. Additionally, Figure 5 shows that netnography is not classified as a relevant topic, indicating that it is not a research topic but rather a study methodology for other topics. This could indicate the need to conduct further studies to establish methodological foundations for other fields, in this case, journalism.

Figure 5.
Count and numerical distribution of the most common topics found in the articles' analysis



Finally, in line with the trend described above, the articles with the highest number of citations in both databases were *Customer knowledge management via social media: the case of Starbucks* (Chua & Banerjee, 2013) with 480 citations; *Immersive netnography: a novel method for service experience research in virtual reality, augmented reality and metaverse contexts* (Kozinets, 2023), with 441 citations; and *Distance as asset? Knowledge collaboration in hybrid virtual communities* (Grabher & Ibert, 2014), with 169 citations.

3.2. Methodological characteristics and software

The most used methodology in the analyzed articles was qualitative (87,5%), followed by mixed methods (12,5%). This aligns with netnography being a qualitative approach. Additionally, 97,26% of the articles are based on empirical research, while only 2,75% are theoretical. Meanwhile, the results reveal high transparency (>95%) in the specification of study objects, units of analysis, subjects, and samples. This indicates growing methodological maturity and an understanding of the importance of precise specification for replicability.

The object of study is specified in 97,3% of studies, and, on the other hand, the unit of analysis is specified in 95,9% of studies, which discloses a clear methodological rigor. The fact that this includes the presence of different media resources —such as individual comments on online news articles, social media posts (posts, tweets, messages), complete discussion threads, user profiles, multimedia content (images, videos), and interactions (likes, shares, replies)— reveals the heterogeneity of the digital phenomena currently being investigated.

The samples vary considerably in size and scope: from hundreds to tens of thousands of units, cross-sectional (specific period) vs. longitudinal (temporal follow-up), with different selection criteria (intentional by relevance, temporal by events, by platform). This depends fundamentally on the themes or methodologies used by the authors, as these are what determine the elements mentioned. Some studies pursue theoretical saturation, while others opt for exhaustive analysis.

When discussing subjects of study, online communities (22,1%), citizens and public (16,2%) dominate, reflecting interest in digital community dynamics and online public opinion. This data indicates a clear interest in understanding phenomena such as the formation of collective identities,

community dynamics, and the expression of digital public opinion. This can also be interpreted in a broader context as an approach to digital participation, a common characteristic of netnographic studies.

3.3. Specific characteristics of netnography

The results of the use of netnography indicate that it is mainly used in combination with other techniques, meaning the articles have a bricolage approach (81,25%). Specifically, the most recurrent techniques were content analysis (40,68%), interviews (23,73%), and thematic analysis (22,03%). This has shown that the standalone format is less common but is necessary for triangulation to ensure the integrity of the studies (Costello et al., 2017, p. 8). Furthermore, this result clearly indicates that netnography can be useful when combined with other methodologies considered more traditional in journalism studies.

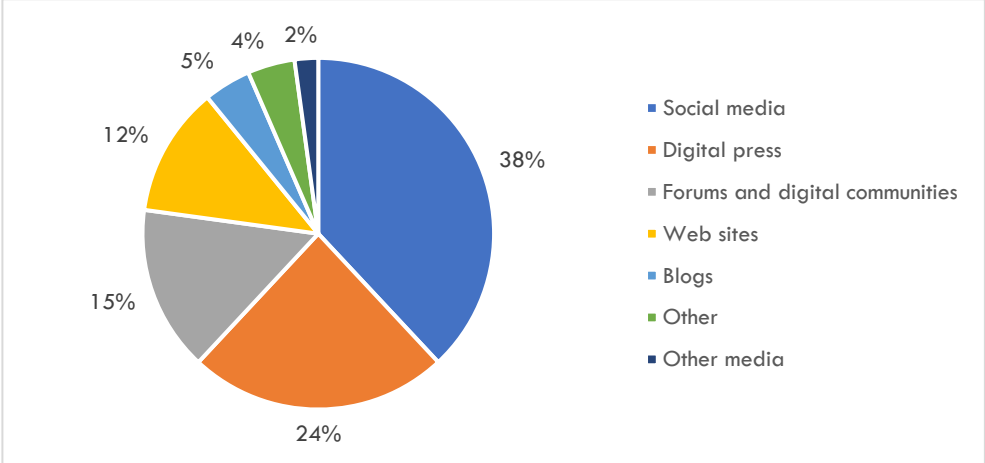
In relation to the theoretical framework of netnography, Robert V. Kozinets was the most frequently cited author (51,35%), with citations from articles published between 1997 and 2021[1]. The next two positions are held by authors Roy Langer and Suzzane C. Beckman (2005) and Muchazondida Mkono (2013), with a percentage of 1,8%. On the other hand, the rest of the authors mentioned account for only 0,9% of the total. This would demonstrate that the definition and systematization of this method have been developed primarily by Kozinets and that it is reliable. Even so, it is necessary to note that other authors with extensive research experience in the development of ethnography in the digital field have emerged, such as Beaven and Laws (2007), Bowler (2010), Driscoll and Gregg (2010), Hine (2000), Klein and Spiegel (2013), and Langer and Beckman (2005).

Regarding the classification of the digital environment, the most common has been semi-public and limited (53%). This will be confirmed later, but the data relates to the prevalence of studies that use social networks and the need to register in advance to conduct research. Therefore, there is a need to explore new contexts that develop in private spheres, where the information collected can add value to the current academic landscape. However, the difficulty of accessing these spaces makes public and semi-public fields more attractive to researchers, who are often concerned about how to address ethical issues such as data access and collection.

Additionally, most use a contextual field (86,11%), indicating a greater interest in specific fields of research that do not vary over time. This result could also be related to the difficulty of studying metafields, where collecting data and participating becomes a very complex task due to the momentary variability that occurs.

Figure 6

Percentage distribution and classification of digital fields of study



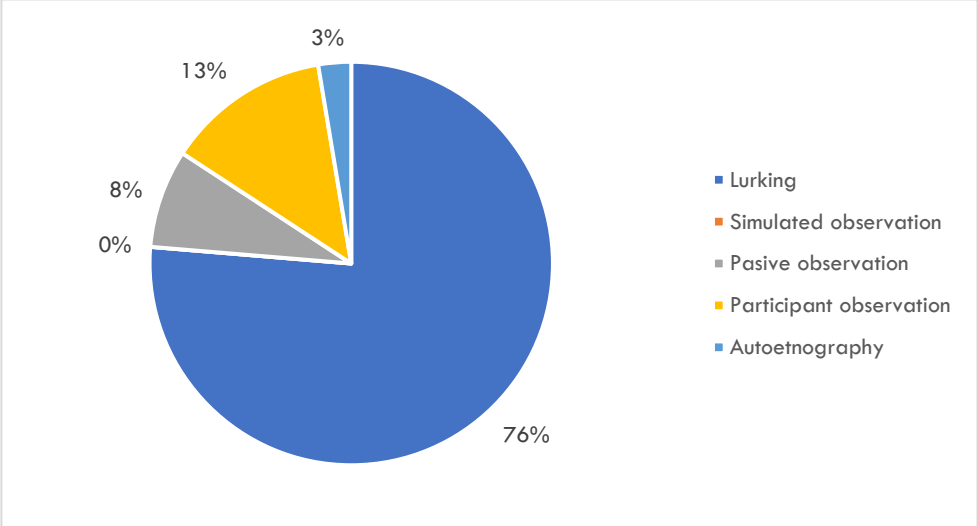
[1] See Kozinets (1997); Kozinets (1998); Kozinets (2002); Kozinets (2010); Kozinets (2015); Kozinets (2019)

In terms of research strategies, open access was found in 54,55% of the articles. Following the ethical recommendations of Kozinets (2019, pp. 163–187), this is a correct and necessary methodological practice, given the need for researchers to disclose to research subjects what they are doing with their data.

On the other hand, the most common type of observation was lurking (76,32%), i.e., a type of research in which the authors enter communities but do not participate. In second place was participant observation (13,16%), in which researchers are part of the environment under investigation and participate openly.

Figure 7

Percentage distribution and classification of the types of observation used in the articles



On the other hand, although only 22.97% of the articles specify that they have used some type of software for data analysis, this has led to the discovery of use patterns. NVivo, in its different versions, has been the most widely used software, with a percentage of 33,33%. Specifically, the NCapture tool ranks second with a percentage of 12,5%, indicating its importance for netnographic analysis. These results reflect a methodological landscape in which the use of software is not yet universal, but there is a clear inclination toward established tools that are adapted to working with digital data. At the same time, we can infer that this is related to what was described above, namely, the desire to preserve data collection and processing in the most natural way possible, in line with the principles of ethnography.

3.4. Data used in the studies

The subjects studied in the analyzed articles have varied, but the category *Perceptions and Opinions* stands out at 18,31%. As noted earlier, this may be because the core of netnography is rooted in marketing and consumer research, suggesting that studies continue to evolve alongside this key focus. This idea is also supported by the second category, *Digital Practices* (14,08%), which shows that a significant number of the articles explore how users develop their practices in the online space.

Figure 8

Percentage of each of the categories related to the nature of the subjects of study in the articles analyzed

As expected, given the characteristics of netnography, when discussing the sample, we see a trend that emerged during data analysis: social media is the area of greatest interest. The percentage of 38.04% reveals that social media ranks among the top categories. The most analyzed spaces are Facebook (12,38%), YouTube and X (8,57%), and Instagram (7,62%). The findings on the most widely used research spaces confirm that social media is at the epicenter of contemporary netnographic practice. At this point, it should be noted that the media—whether in digital format or not—is used in 33,78% of the articles analyzed. On the other hand, only 12,76% of them specifically analyze media, which could indicate a field of study that is still largely unexplored but is becoming more common. As mentioned above, the post-pandemic context has made these spaces new environments for socialization, making it appropriate and consistent with current events to analyze them. Even so, there is a lack of interest in studying digital newspapers, which offer current, up-to-date information on a range of topics.

Similarly, the unit of analysis highlights that posts and comments are two of the most common formats, each accounting for 24.39%. Kozinets (2019, pp. 15-16) refers to these as "traces" that people leave on the internet and which are the focus of netnography research. Therefore, using them as objects of study makes sense, since they are spaces where people leave and contribute information related to different topics, as if it were a kind of conversation, but with the potential to do so with hundreds or thousands of people simultaneously.

Furthermore, the reality of the sample countries is that most studies have an international scope (29,73%), as they primarily use social media as a research tool, allowing them to expand their reach. This can be highlighted as a relevant feature of netnography, as it enables a more comprehensive and varied collection of information, allowing in-depth exploration of specific contexts.

If we refer to the most researched country, we can see that it is the United States (8,11%), followed by the United Kingdom (6,76%) and Australia (5,41%). As can be seen from the analysis of the basic data in the articles, there is clearly a Western bias, despite the clear participation of other countries. Therefore, other contexts should be explored, covering fields of study that have not yet been considered.

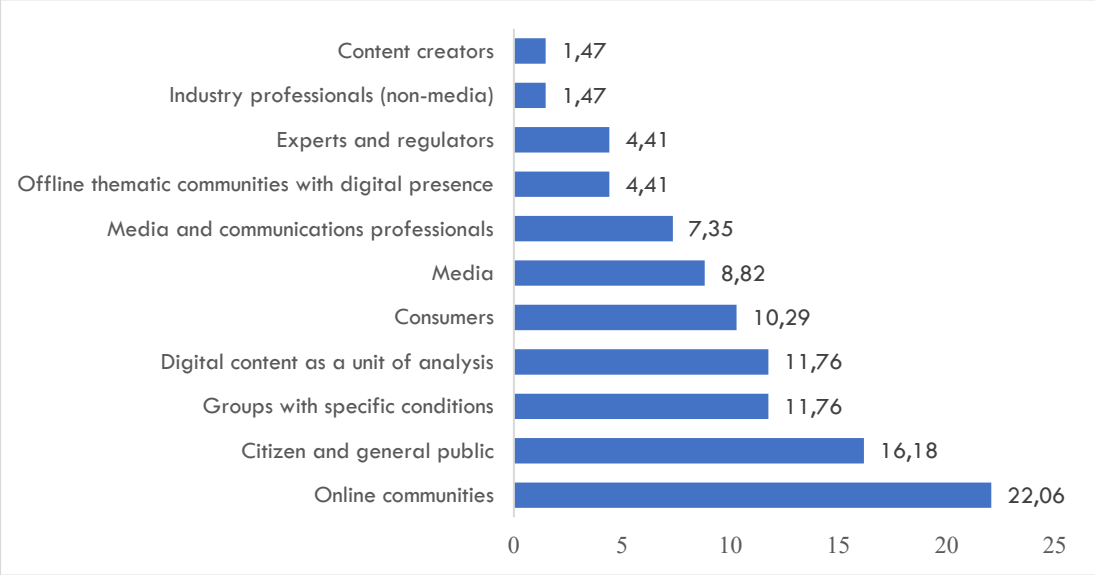
When discussing which group is most analyzed in research, we can see that Online communities account for 22,06%. This aligns with the definition of netnography, which aims to observe the cultural interactions among groups of people. Despite this, the next category is *Citizenship and general public* (16, 18%), indicating that some studies do not focus on specific communities but

rather on citizen groups that lack similar characteristics. Finally, Groups with specific conditions and Digital content as a unit of analysis (11,76%) occupy the third position, reflecting that the research focuses on specific groups—linked to characteristics such as gender or age—in addition to taking content created on platforms as a unit of research.

At this point, it is important to note that the media and media professionals are not the focus of research, as we can see in *Figure* 9, where they account for 8,82% and 7,35%, respectively. This could be related to the result analyzed above in the sample, as it is still a growing field. Furthermore, the lack of theorization in this field may be preventing researchers from including netnography as a possible study methodology suited to their needs.

Figure 9

Percentage distribution of the groups analyzed in the studies



4. Discussion

As has been demonstrated, the use of netnography in journalistic research has taken off in the last five years, likely driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has acted as a catalyst for the massive digitization of social life, making online spaces epistemologically suitable for studying online communities as genuine social phenomena, rather than mere epiphenomena of "real" life (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023).

Conversely, the expansion of the discipline, as shown in the data, confirms the usefulness of netnography for research across various fields. It has been observed that researchers employ it in studying the digital public sphere (Palupi, 2024), corporate communication (Utama & Basuki, 2023; Langer & Beckmann, 2005), and educational communities (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015). Despite this diversity, potential biases have been noted, particularly regarding the geographical concentration of publications in Western countries and the possibility of a gender gap in authorship. However, this observation stems from a preliminary screening of author names and therefore requires a more detailed analysis to determine whether a gender imbalance truly exists. This underscores the need to expand the research's focus, using netnography as a suitable method for accessing underrepresented communities. Additionally, it has been noted that researchers are still beginning to explore journalism research more deeply. Both detected problems may be related to the relatively new nature of this methodology and the limited theoretical research available on it.

For that reason, if we look at the use of media in the samples, we can see that more than a third of them use media, but only one in ten analyzes it as a specific object of research. This reveals a significant paradox: media frequently appear as contexts or platforms for data collection (especially in comment sections of online news), yet they are rarely the central analytical focus.

This under-exploration is surprising, given the centrality of digital media in shaping public debate, agenda-setting, and mediating social controversies. Online media constitute hybrid spaces where traditional journalistic logics converge with the participatory dynamics of social networks, generating specific communicative cultures that deserve greater netnographic attention. Additionally, fewer than 10% of studies focus on media outlets as subjects of analysis and investigate media professionals. The media ecology currently offers a valid context for analysis and represents an important opportunity for future research.

Netnographic analysis of digital newsrooms, fact-checking communities, groups of journalists on platforms, or the collaborative construction of news in participatory spaces could enrich both communication studies and netnographic methodology itself. Furthermore, characteristics specific to this methodology, such as in-depth analysis or extensive knowledge of the field of study (Kozinets, 2019), could enable research in polarized online environments or settings involving disinformation. This is because netnography provides tools for cultural engagement that facilitate the study of the language, symbols, and norms of communities (Turpo Gebera, 2008), ultimately leading to a detailed understanding of each situation of interest.

Otherwise, findings on the most widely used research spaces confirm that social media is the epicenter of contemporary netnographic practice. Despite this, the relative scarcity of studies on alternative platforms, encrypted spaces, specialized forums, or niche communities suggests that vast areas of digital sociability remain unexplored. This gap is particularly problematic, considering that many relevant social phenomena —from countercultural movements to marginalized communities— develop in spaces that deliberately avoid mainstream platforms. Nevertheless, netnography is still developing in fields beyond the "traditional" ones, while some researchers continue to have doubts about how to conduct research in this field. Because of this, entering these fields could be a future line of work for netnographic studies.

There has been growth in the use of netnography, but this does not mean it has reached a mature, methodologically consolidated stage; rather, there are fluid spaces. First, data on methodological transparency reveal a mixed picture. On the one hand, the high rate of specification of key elements —object of study, unit of analysis, subjects, and sample— indicates growing methodological maturity and an understanding of the importance of replicability and verifiability in qualitative research. On the other hand, the lack of transparency regarding analytical tools is not merely a reporting problem but reflects deeper tensions in the relationship between netnography and computational methods. There appears to be resistance within the netnographic community to integrating quantitative or computational techniques, possibly out of fear of compromising the interpretive depth that characterizes the method. Nevertheless, this resistance may be limiting the potential of netnography to address large-scale phenomena or identify patterns that are not immediately visible through manual analysis.

In addition to transparency, netnography faces significant methodological challenges that require ongoing attention. Although the qualitative data in this review did not systematically capture ethical practices, researchers report obstacles related to ethics and consent, particularly in negotiating public/private distinctions and participant expectations in online settings. Delimiting the field and the role of the researcher pose fundamental difficulties, as defining the boundaries of an online "field" and practicing participant observation differ substantially from those in offline ethnography, thereby complicating sampling and immersion strategies. Although Kozinets (2019) has continuously updated his ethical guidelines, proposing specific protocols for different types of netnography and digital contexts, the application of these principles in actual research practice appears to be heterogeneous. Some studies adopt maximalist positions, stating that they investigate even in public spaces (see Lynch, 2014; Jeppesen & Sartoretto, 2023), while others adopt minimalist positions, conducting covert access (see Lee & Ko, 2022; Xi, 2024).

Growing concerns about digital privacy, regulations such as GDPR in Europe, and debates about data extraction by commercial platforms are reshaping the ethical landscape of digital research. Netnographers of the future will have to navigate stricter regulatory frameworks, changing user expectations about privacy, and tensions between access to data for research and the protection

of digital rights. This way, as seen in recent years with the case of social network X (Twitter), accessing data from your posts may become increasingly difficult, so collecting and immersing in the field may pose a new challenge for netnographers. In the future, other studies could examine the ethical use of netnography while also delving deeper into how current literature specifies the limitations encountered when following the steps of this type of study.

Algorithmic opacity is another major challenge, as platform algorithms shape patterns of visibility and interaction in ways that are difficult to observe or control, undermining direct interpretations of online artifacts (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). The volume and multimodality of data create analytical complexity and raise questions about the feasibility of comprehensive qualitative coding and representativeness (Garcia et al., 2018; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). Furthermore, maintaining the researcher's positionality and necessary "estrangement" while building rapport and avoiding undue influence requires reflective methods and clear documentation of the researcher's presence (Amaral et al., 2014). Even so, netnography can provide a "human" approach, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the fields of study. In this way, strategies such as participant observation could help address complications arising from algorithmic opacity by enabling researchers to get to know communities firsthand, making it easier to identify their characteristics.

Therefore, it is necessary to mention that the rise of generative AI models can create both opportunities and risks for netnography. On the one hand, it enables scaling screening and summarizing large collections, integrating multimodal reading (text, image and video), and better documenting analytical decisions, thereby strengthening methodological structure and triangulation. On the other hand, it introduces challenges such as opacity, hallucinations, bias, and a potential loss of reflexivity (see Cárdenas et al., 2024; Ciubotaru, 2025; Valentino, 2025) if too much control is delegated. Its use should follow best practices: clearly state the models and prompts used, ensure traceability to the original data, apply systematic human validation, triangulate results with manual or traditional software methods, and strengthen ethical protocols in public or semi-public settings. In this way, AI can expand the researcher's capabilities in netnography without replacing the researcher's contextual interpretation.

Moreover, netnography has other potentialities that make it a suitable method for studying journalism. Netnography enables the study of social phenomena in real time, capturing emerging dynamics that are difficult to address with traditional methods. Furthermore, it is a method that encourages naturalness, as interactions occur independently of the researcher, reducing the reactivity effects characteristic of interviews or focus groups. Netnography also allows for movement between micro (individual interactions) and macro (aggregate trends) levels, offering analytical flexibility. Precisely for this reason, as has been verified above, its use is particularly useful in combination with more traditional methods, thereby achieving good methodological stability.

Given all these reasons, future directions for netnographic research in journalism include developing more robust methods for multimodal, multiplatform, and algorithm-aware analysis; clearer, more discipline-specific ethical standards; and longitudinal designs that allow tracking cultural and communicative changes over time (Özkoçak & Şahin, 2024; Garcia et al., 2018). In this regard, it is essential to develop frameworks to integrate it with computational methods, creating hybrid designs that combine the interpretive depth of ethnography with the analytical scalability of other techniques, accounting for algorithmic mediation and large multimodal data sets (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). Likewise, it is necessary to develop specific ethical protocols that account for the particularities of the media as objects of study and of hybrid spaces for public interaction. Finally, more interdisciplinary work is needed to connect netnography with fields such as computer science, education, and organizational studies, as well as comparative studies that examine cultural and contextual differences in online communication practices (Garcia et al., 2018; Özkoçak & Şahin, 2024).

5. Conclusions

The results of this systematic review reveal a complex and dynamic picture of the current state of netnographic research. The analysis of 74 studies published between 2011 and 2025 allows us to identify both significant advances and persistent challenges facing netnography as a research methodology in journalism.

As has been demonstrated, netnography is a suitable method for studying fields closely related to journalism, such as the public sphere or citizen participation communities. However, the media and communication professionals remain under-explored subjects of analysis from this perspective, opening a relevant and underdeveloped field of research.

Despite its clear potential, it is important to remember that netnography continues to face significant challenges. These challenges primarily concern ethics, the role of algorithms, and methodological interaction. However, the foreseeable growth in its use as a research technique could lead to the gradual clarification and development of these aspects, contributing to its methodological consolidation in the study of online journalism.

6. Limitations

When discussing limitations, we can highlight five fundamental ones. First, the size and composition of the corpus, since the analysis is based on 74 studies, a substantial but not exhaustive sample of global netnographic production. It is likely that relevant publications have not been included, in particular: (a) articles in languages other than English and Spanish, (b) publications in journals not indexed in the main databases, (c) doctoral theses, books, or book chapters that use netnography, and (d) applied research or technical reports outside traditional academic circles.

Secondly, a publication bias as this review analyzes only published studies, which introduces a bias toward research with "successful" or "interesting" results. Netnographic research that encountered significant methodological difficulties, did not produce publishable findings, or was rejected in peer review processes is not included. This bias may create an overly optimistic picture of the method's viability and effectiveness.

Third, there may be incomplete information in the original articles, as many dimensions of the analysis depend on information explicitly reported in the articles. When studies do not specify certain elements (e.g., the software used or the theoretical framework), it is not possible to determine whether these elements were absent or simply not reported. This ambiguity may lead to an underestimation of practices that do occur but are not documented.

Fourth, the period analyzed includes the COVID-19 pandemic, an extraordinary event that dramatically accelerated the digitization of social life. This may have artificially inflated netnographic publication rates and skewed topics toward pandemic-related phenomena. It is unclear whether the trends observed represent a "new normal" or a temporary anomaly.

Finally, platform obsolescence, as some of the studies analyzed investigated platforms that no longer exist or have changed radically (e.g., the shift from Twitter to X). This volatility makes it difficult to assess the durability of the results and the replicability of the studies.

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