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## Netnography and Discourse Analysis in Digital Environments: Methodological Convergences for the Study of Virtual Communities in the Age of Algorithms

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### Abstract

*This essay presents a theoretical-methodological framework for the qualitative study of digital communities through an articulation of netnography, discourse analysis (DA), and, optionally, social network analysis (SNA). Grounded in the epistemological principles of critical realism, this approach enables the examination not only of observable practices but also of the discursive structures and underlying generative mechanisms shaping meaning in algorithmically mediated environments. Drawing from a critical review of the literature and a flexible methodological proposal, the paper emphasizes the role of methodological triangulation as a tool for grasping the multiscale complexity of digital ecosystems, underpinned by principles of adaptability, reflexivity, and situated ethics. It concludes by outlining a methodological development agenda, including multimodal netnographic protocols, critical use of AI, and theorization of algorithmic agency.*

**Keywords:** Netnography, Discourse Analysis, Methodological Triangulation, Critical Realism, Digital Communities.

### Introduction

The socio-technical transformations of everyday life have overwhelmed the traditional methodologies of the social sciences, demanding approaches capable of capturing the new logics of meaning, power and agency that shape digital communities. In a context marked by the accelerated advance of digital technologies capable of automating language, curating content and modulating behavior - as is the case with generative artificial intelligence or algorithmic recommender systems - it is essential to build methodological frameworks that not only describe digital practices, but also understand their logics of production, reproduction and exclusion.

In the last decade, the exponential growth of digital environments has profoundly transformed the way in which people interact, construct meaning and configure collective identities. These sociotechnical transformations have not only redefined forms of participation and cultural consumption, but have also challenged the ability of traditional social science methodological approaches to capture the complexity, fluidity and agency that characterize contemporary digital communities. Jesús Martín Barbero (2010, p. 81) points out that “the transformations in the ways

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in which knowledge circulates constitute one of the most profound transformations that a society can undergo.”

“From the first men on earth to the present day, it has always been necessary to transfer information, either with a simple gesture or a message via cell phone. The means of communication have been evolving and improving over time so that people can obtain, in a simple and easy way, the information they need.” (Velásquez, et al. 2018, 584).

Beyond being communication channels, digital platforms have consolidated their own logics of symbolic interaction, algorithmic visibility and discursive production, whose understanding requires situated, critical and multiscale methodologies. Given this scenario, there is a need to rethink the tools of observation, interpretation and analysis available to social researchers, especially in contexts where language, image, performativity and technical infrastructure are increasingly indissolubly intertwined. The culture of knowledge demands links beyond national borders, it assumes new forms of community through voluntary, temporary and tactical affiliations (Velásquez, 2018).

This essay proposes a coherent methodological articulation between three complementary qualitative approaches: netnography, discourse analysis (DA) and, optionally, social network analysis (SNA). This combination is proposed under the epistemological framework of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978), which allows not only to observe empirical phenomena, but also to explore underlying social structures and generative mechanisms of meaning production. Thus, a methodological triangulation is proposed that enables a stratified reading of digital communities from the empirical, actual and real levels.

This work does not seek to be an applied empirical study, but to develop a theoretical-methodological model, adaptable to different contexts and fields of digital research. To this end, we start from a deep conceptual review of the selected approaches (netnography and DL), present a flexible and ethically situated methodological design, and discuss their potentialities and tensions in digital environments with direct influence of algorithms.

The essay is structured in four sections. First, a theoretical framework is presented that contextualizes and defines the central methodological approaches. Second, a methodological proposal consistent with the principles of critical realism is described. Third, the epistemological, ethical and practical implications of this articulation are discussed, and finally, conclusions and emerging lines for the development of new critical methodologies in the study of digital communities are presented.

## **1. Integrated theoretical framework: Netnography, Discourse Analysis and situated digital research**

This discussion takes on particular relevance in a historical moment marked by the rise of technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, the automation of discourse, the production of deepfakes and increasing algorithmic polarization. These dynamics not only complexify digital interaction, but also profoundly transform modes of signification, agency and visibility, challenging social methodologies to respond with greater analytical sophistication and ethical commitment.

Netnography: conceptual evolution and methodological scope

Originally developed by Kozinets (1997, 2002), netnography is an adaptation of ethnography to digital contexts, focusing on the study of communities and cultures mediated by computer-

mediated communication technologies. In its most recent formulation, Kozinets (2021) redefines netnography as an intensive qualitative method, based on research, interaction and immersion, oriented to the analysis of digital cultures from a situated and critical perspective.

Netnography differs from both traditional ethnography and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) in that it emphasizes the interpretation of significant digital traces -texts, images, videos, cultural codes- in a non-face-to-face but contextual observation framework. As Del Fresno (2011) and Turpo (2008) point out, this approach requires a deep reading of symbolic and relational environments, as well as a permanent adaptation to the algorithmic logic of platforms.

In recent research, netnography has proven to be particularly effective in exploring marginalized communities, spaces of symbolic consumption (Brennan et al., 2015), and processes of value co-creation in digital contexts (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Its applicability to phenomena such as engagement, digital identity, opinion leadership, or social movements has allowed researchers to access emerging meanings not evident from other methodologies.

Building on this, contemporary netnographic inquiry requires a methodological sensitivity that bridges cultural analysis with technological affordances. Researchers must not only interpret user-generated content and community dynamics but also account for the platform-mediated architectures that shape interaction patterns and visibility. As platforms increasingly mediate social reality through algorithmic filtering and content prioritization, netnography evolves as a hybrid methodology—both observational and interpretative, both human-centered and system-aware. This dual orientation enables the capture of socio-digital practices and narratives in flux, offering a robust lens for understanding the complexities of mediated cultural production and participation in digital ecosystems.

#### Discourse Analysis: multidisciplinary approach and semiotic expansion

The DP is consolidated as a methodological and technical approach that allows the study of language not only as a form of communication, but also as a structured and meaning-producing social practice. From Van Dijk's initial formulations (Wodak, 2014) to the most recent reflections of Latin American authors such as Santander (2011) or Sayago (2014), DL has bifurcated into multiple traditions that include Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), discursive semiotics and multimodal studies.

Pedro Santander (2011) posits that DL can be understood simultaneously as both a method and a technique, depending on its place in the research design. He proposes a key distinction: DL is relevant as long as the object of study has a clear symbolic representation, be it textual, visual or sound. Based on this, authors such as Canales (2006) extend the field to complex communicative objects, where visual, sound, ideological or narrative codes converge.

Sayago (2014) complements this vision by suggesting that contemporary AD should focus on discursive strategies that emerge in sociotechnical contexts, considering that digital discourses are not simply texts, but practices with social agency. This obliges the researcher to master not only classical linguistic methods, but also techniques of semiotic reading, multimodal analysis, contemporary hermeneutics, and digital ethnography.

#### Methodological convergence: towards a situated and realistic stance

Although netnography and DL can operate independently, their convergence allows for a more holistic reading of digital communities. Baptista's work (2022), published in the *European Journal of Management and Marketing Studies*, proposes precisely a methodological integration

between netnography and social network analysis (SNA), based on the paradigm of critical realism. This articulation recognizes three levels of reality: the empirical domain (perceptions and observable interactions), the actual domain (underlying interaction structures) and the real domain (invisible generative mechanisms that explain social agency).

From this perspective, netnography is situated in the empirical domain - observing experiences, discourses and digital cultural practices - while DL allows a simultaneous entry into the actual and real domain, by interpreting the meaning structures and ideological mechanisms that emerge in the discourses of communities. This methodological triangulation, understood as a coherent combination of qualitative approaches with different levels of abstraction, offers an indispensable analytical robustness for current digital social studies (Bhaskar, 1978; Rees & Gatenby, 2014).

This conceptual framework provides the basis for designing methodological proposals that respond robustly to the empirical and epistemological complexity of the contemporary digital environment, which is developed below.

## **2. Theoretical Methodological Proposal for the Study of Digital Communities**

After reviewing the theoretical bases and the articulating potential of netnography and discourse analysis, this section presents a methodological design model oriented to qualitative research in complex digital contexts. Its value lies not in an immediate empirical application, but in its reflexive, adaptive character, aligned with contemporary epistemic and ethical principles.

The choice of netnography, discourse analysis and structural analysis (SNA) responds to both their epistemic compatibility and their complementary capacity to address different levels of digital social reality. Unlike other qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews or narrative analysis, which privilege individual or textual reconstruction, this triad allows us to simultaneously analyze social practices, discursive structures and relational patterns in contexts naturally mediated by technologies.

This methodological articulation does not seek to replace other approaches, but rather to offer a robust framework to address complex phenomena in digital environments where algorithms influence and even decide the levels of exposure and influence of content and conversations.

From this complementarity, a multi-layered view of digital phenomena is enhanced, in which the symbolic, the relational and the performative are intertwined. While netnography makes it possible to capture practices, rituals and dynamics of belonging from a prolonged immersion in digital environments, discourse analysis reveals the ideological frameworks, constructions of meaning and rhetorical strategies that organize content. For its part, structural analysis (SNA) provides a reading of the connections and centralities that shape the circulation of information, influencing the visibility, legitimization and hierarchization of voices within the digital ecosystem. Thus, this methodological combination not only enriches the understanding of the object of study from different levels, but also allows articulating a critical reading of the devices of power and algorithmic mediation that condition the forms of interaction, production and consumption in sociotechnical spaces.

Contemporary digital social research requires a flexible, reflexive and situated methodological design. This work adopts a qualitative approach based on the methodological triangulation between netnography, discourse analysis (DA) and, optionally, social network analysis (SNA), with epistemic foundations inspired by critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978; Baptista, 2022). This

design allows for a multiscale exploration of the phenomena of interaction, meaning and structure in virtual communities.

Design principles: adaptability, reflexivity and situated ethics

This methodological approach responds to three essential principles:

**Adaptability:** given the rapid obsolescence of platforms and formats, a design is required that allows adjustments in real time, respecting the cultural logic of the observed community (Kozinets, 2021).

**Epistemological reflexivity:** the researcher is not an external observer, but an interpreting actor who influences the reading and re-reading of the data (Canales, 2006; Rees & Gatenby, 2014).

**Situated ethics:** the approach follows the guidelines of Franzke et al. (2020), prioritizing contextual consent, participant privacy and respect for the cultural codes of each digital community.

### **Phases of Digital Fieldwork**

Following the model of Kozinets (2021) and refinements proposed by Baptista (2022), the methodological process could be managed in four sequential phases:

**Cultural entrée:** identification of relevant communities on platforms such as Reddit, TikTok, Instagram or YouTube. This selection could be guided by criteria of interaction density, thematic coherence and observable discursive activity. At this stage, the empirical and theoretical relevance of the field would be validated.

**Observational immersion and collection of digital traces:** under a non-intrusive observation logic, public materials such as posts, comment threads, videos, reactions, memes or linked hashtags could be collected. The collection should not be automated, prioritizing situated interpretative reading (Caliandro, 2014), and metadata such as temporality, level of engagement and link between participants would be recorded.

**Multimodal discourse analysis:** the collected materials could be analyzed discursively following a double logic:

**Semiotic and contextual reading:** identification of relevant visual, textual and symbolic codes (Sayago, 2014; Santander, 2011).

**Thematic and ideological categorization:** classification of discourses according to identity, emotional, political or consumer orientations, supported by interpretative matrixes constructed ad hoc.

Complementarily, the construction of relational patterns could be added. This means that, when the community allows it, a basic structural analysis can be integrated using elements of Social Network Analysis (SNA). This will make it possible to visualize central nodes, types of links (mention, replication, validation) and to detect leadership dynamics, exclusion or the formation of symbolic clusters (Freeman, 2004; Baptista, 2022).

### **Methodological Triangulation as A Guarantee Of Robustness**

Triangulation is not limited to a diversity of techniques, but rather to the integration of different dimensions of reality (empirical, actual and real) - a proposal consistent with the critical realism approach (Bhaskar, 1978). This structure allows the researcher not only to observe “what is said”

in the community, but also to analyze how this discourse is socially organized, and what structures condition, legitimize or reproduce it. In this context, the role of the researcher varies according to the domain of reality applied, as can be seen in Table 1 below.

Reality domain	Main method	Observed object	Researcher's role
Empirical	Netnography	Observed digital experiences and practices	Immersed contextual-observer: records interactions and content in their native environment
Actual	Discourse analysis (DA)	Discursive and ideological configuration	Critical interpreter: analyzes structures of meaning, dominant narratives and exclusions
Real	SNA + critical theoretical framework	Underlying social structural mechanisms	Reflective structural analyst: identifies power relations, agency and latent conditions

Table 1: Methodological Triangulation of the Analysis of Reality Domains

This approach also makes it possible to identify algorithmic biases, invisibilization dynamics and power relations, offering a critical reading that transcends the textual or the anecdotal (Marwick, 2021; Rogers, 2024).

The choice of critical realism as an epistemological framework not only allows us to coherently articulate the three proposed methods, but also provides a distinctive analytical capacity: integrating different levels of explanation -from the individual-experiential, the semiotic-discursive, to the structural-institutional-.

Unlike approaches such as constructionism or pragmatism, critical realism enables a stratified view that does not stop at the observable level, but seeks to understand the underlying mechanisms that produce and condition social practices in digital contexts.

### Validation and Quality Considerations

Validity in this approach is not conceived as statistical replicability, but as argumentative coherence between data, context and explanations offered. The following strategies could be used to ensure the quality of the work:

Dense descriptions (thick description) of the proposed digital scenarios.

Discursive saturation criteria to stop the collection.

Reflective recording of the researcher's role in analytical diaries.

Checking with community members (when possible and ethically feasible).

### 3. Theoretical-methodological discussion: convergences, tensions and emerging lines in the study of digital communities

The rigorous study of contemporary digital communities demands a deep methodological reflection that not only integrates technical tools, but also critically reviews the epistemic and ontological frameworks that support them. This section analyzes the main tensions, potentials

and challenges in articulating netnography, discourse analysis and related approaches, under a paradigm of situated qualitative triangulation.

### **Netnography and Discourse Analysis: Convergences from the Interpretative Praxis**

Both netnography and discourse analysis (DA) share a qualitative, interpretative and situated root. Both methodologies start from an understanding of culture as text - whether lived, narrated or visualized - and place the researcher in an active position of interpretation.

While netnography emphasizes immersion, interaction and reading of the digital everyday (Kozinets, 2021; Del Fresno, 2011), AD proposes a deep decoding of meanings structured through language and other sign systems (Santander, 2011; Sayago, 2014). Convergence becomes particularly fertile in contexts such as memes, argumentative threads, viral formats or digital performances, where discourse is inseparable from its mediated and multimodal ecology.

From this perspective, it is not a matter of “choosing” between AD or netnography, but of conceiving them as complementary approaches: one centered on the cultural-relational dimension, the other on the structural-semiotic dimension of meaning.

The convergence between both approaches becomes especially fruitful in contexts where digital discourse manifests itself in hybrid, ephemeral and highly codified forms: memes, argumentative threads, cascading comments, hashtags, reels, viral videos or network performances. In these digital ecologies, meanings are not only constructed through language, but also through multimodal devices and interaction frameworks specific to the digital environment. Thus, netnography allows us to understand the how of the cultural phenomenon in its context of appearance and experience, while AD helps to deconstruct the what and why of its symbolic and rhetorical structure.

From this perspective, it is not a matter of “choosing” between discourse analysis or netnography, but of integrating them as complementary methodological approaches. The former provides tools to address the structural and semiotic dimension of meaning, while the latter makes it possible to understand the cultural, relational and emotional dynamics that underpin digital communicative practice.

### **The Value of Qualitative Triangulation in Polysemous Environments**

In the context of hypertextual, polysemous and algorithm-mediated digital environments, methodological triangulation is not a luxury, but an epistemological necessity. Pink et al. (2022) insist that methodological validity in digital research comes not from quantitative exhaustiveness, but from the ability to capture multiple layers of meaning, from the performative to the structural.

Baptista's work (2022) extends this vision by proposing a combination of netnography with social network analysis (SNA), based on the framework of critical realism. This integration makes it possible to operate on three levels:

Empirical: what is directly perceived and recorded (narratives, practices).

Actual: the social dynamics that structure these practices (relationships, norms, codes).

Real: the underlying generative mechanisms that produce or condition these forms of interaction and meaning.

This stratified ontological perspective is especially useful for understanding complex phenomena such as algorithmic leadership, emotional performativity or the circulation of meanings in fan communities, digital activism or symbolic consumption.

### **Methodological Tensions: Risks of Forced Assimilation and Analytical Automation**

However, integrating approaches is not without its challenges. Methodological hybridization can lead to forced assimilations, where techniques are superimposed without a clear epistemic articulation. This occurs, for example, when attempts are made to use SNA only for its visual or quantitative appeal, without considering whether it responds to the type of questions posed.

Similarly, the increasing use of automated tools (such as sentiment analysis, NLP (Natural Language Processing) or mass scraping) can obscure the need for situated, critical and ethical reading. As Marwick (2021) warns, algorithmic opacity and biases embedded in digital platforms can severely distort data, if not contextualized.

The proposal of this paper, therefore, insists on a triangulation that is not only technical, but epistemologically coherent and ethically informed, with a strong emphasis on researcher reflexivity and methodological adaptation to each digital field.

Despite its potential, the methodological approach presented here is not without limitations. Its implementation requires a high level of interdisciplinary competence on the part of the researcher, including knowledge in semiotics, critical theory, digital analysis and network visualization. In addition, the opacity of algorithms on many platforms can make it difficult to trace certain structural patterns, compromising analytical transparency. Finally, the combination of approaches requires long immersion and analysis times, which can be an operational barrier in resource-constrained research.

### **Emerging Lines for Methodological Development**

This essay proposes the following future lines to consolidate and expand the methodological field of study on digital communities:

Development of multimodal netnographic observation protocols that integrate interactions, visualities, algorithms and affects.

Cross-training in semiotics, critical discourse analysis and digital cultural studies for social science and communication researchers.

Adaptive ethics: building dynamic consent and privacy criteria according to the type of community, platform and object of study (Franzke et al., 2020).

Critical application of AI and automatic tools as support, not replacement, for deep analytical interpretation.

Methodological theorization of the role of the algorithm as an actor with structuring agency, in line with proposals such as the “sociology of digital media” (Rogers, 2024).

These emerging lines respond to the need to approach digital communities as complex, hybrid and constantly mutating phenomena. In an ecosystem where the textual, the visual, the algorithmic and the affective coexist and interpenetrate, the development of multimodal protocols becomes indispensable in order not to reduce the expressive richness and interaction logics of the digital environment.

Cross-training in disciplines such as semiotics or digital cultural studies provides the researcher with more robust conceptual frameworks to interpret implicit meanings, visual symbols and emerging narratives. In turn, adaptive ethics poses a shift away from rigid normative approaches, advocating a situated sensibility that attends to the technical, cultural and affective specificities of each observed community.

Finally, the recognition of the algorithm as an actor with structuring agency demands not only technical tools for its analysis, but also a theoretical shift to understand its role in the mediation of the social, the communicative and the political. Together, these proposals aim to consolidate a more flexible, critical and interdisciplinary methodological toolbox, in accordance with the demands of contemporary digital studies.

#### **4. Conclusions: Towards An Integrated, Critical and Situated Approach to the Study of Digital Communities**

This essay has proposed a coherent methodological articulation between netnography, discourse analysis (DA) and structural analysis (SNA), framed within an epistemological paradigm of critical realism. Faced with the insufficiency of traditional models to capture the emerging logics of interaction, agency and signification in digital contexts, a robust methodological alternative is proposed that recognizes the stratified complexity of social media phenomena.

The theoretical and methodological journey developed in the previous sections allows us to draw the following central conclusions:

Netnography, as a situated qualitative method, provides an experiential and interpretative look at digital practices in their native environments. Its value lies in capturing the everyday life of users from their own cultural codes, without imposing exogenous frameworks of analysis.

Discourse analysis, on the other hand, allows us to unveil the ideological, narrative and symbolic structures that permeate digital productions. Its semiotic and multimodal approach effectively complements netnographic observation, providing interpretative depth to the analysis of digital communities.

The combination of both methodologies gains strength when incorporated into a stratified triangulation logic, consistent with the principles of critical realism. This framework makes it possible to differentiate between the observable (empirical), the structural (actual) and the causal (real), facilitating an analytical reading that transcends the surface of the data and enables explanations with greater interpretative capacity.

As a methodological proposal, this articulation does not impose a single analytical path, but offers an adaptable, ethically informed and epistemologically reflective framework. Its principles of flexibility, contextual appropriateness and ethical responsibility allow its use in studies with diverse objectives, from cultural analysis to the monitoring of emerging social phenomena.

Finally, it sets out a future methodological agenda focused on the development of multimodal netnographic observation, the critical integration of AI and automatic tools, and a more precise understanding of the structuring role played by algorithms and digital platforms in the configuration of meaning and power.

This approach offers not only a solid framework for advanced theoretical analysis, but also a valuable tool for applied empirical studies on phenomena such as digital social movements,

disinformation propagation and digital identities, strengthening its explanatory and critical potential for future research.

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