

SELF-ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

An approach to investigate how people interact with one another in online communities, also known as virtual or cyber ethnography.

Duration	<p>Preparation: 0.5 hours–1 week (depending on approach and accessibility)</p> <p>Activity: 1 hours–12 weeks (depending on research aim and approach)</p> <p>Follow-up: 0.5 hours–2 weeks (depending on amount and type of data)</p>
Physical requirements	Computer, notebook, software for screenshots or screencasts, and if needed, legal agreements (consent and/or confidentiality agreement)
Energy level	Low
Researchers/Facilitators	1 (depending on approach, more may be needed)
Participants	n/a
Expected output	Text (quotes, transcripts, field notes), screenshots, recordings (screencasts or audio recordings)

Often online ethnographies include a mix of methods, such as contextual interviews conducted online with screen sharing or in-depth retrospective interviews with other community members.⁰¹ There are different ways to do online ethnography, including:

- Self-ethnographic research, where a researcher becomes part of a community and documents her own experiences.
- Non-participant online ethnography, where researchers decide to only observe, for example, an online community.
- Participant online ethnography, where researchers get in touch with specific participants to “shadow” their online activities (e.g., through screen sharing).

Online ethnographies can focus on many different aspects, such as social interactions within an online community or the differences in self-perception of people when they are online in comparison to their self-perception in real

⁰¹ One of the most-cited descriptions of virtual ethnography is Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. Sage.



life. Online ethnography can be overt or covert. When you do overt online ethnography, people you interact with online know that you are a researcher, while a covert approach means that people you interact with do not know that you're a researcher. When researchers are visible to the people around them, it is important to be aware of a potential "observer effect" – the influence researchers have on their environment and on their community's behavior simply by being present (also virtually).

Step-by-step guide

1 Define specific research question

Define your research question or what you want to find out. Consider why you are doing research (exploratory vs. confirmatory research) and what you want to do with your findings (personas, journey maps, system maps, etc.).

2 Plan and prepare

Based on your research question or topic, define which online communities might be suitable and whether

you will conduct your research overtly or covertly. Consider when you want to conduct your study and how much time you will plan for it. Decide how you will document your experiences (e.g., through screenshots or screencasts, system or journey maps, or simply field notes). Check if you need any legal agreements to do recordings or screenshots; sometimes you will need to disguise other community members if you want to distribute screenshots and the like.

3 Conduct online ethnography

During your online ethnography, try to distinguish between first-level and second-level concepts: what you (objectively) see and hear vs. how you feel about or interpret what you see and hear. If you take field notes, write up both separately. If you conduct overt online ethnography, be aware of a potential observer effect (also virtually). The length and depth of online ethnography varies with the research objective: from a few hours to several days, weeks, or months.

4 Follow-up

Review your data and highlight important passages. Write up your individual key learnings, and if other researchers have done online ethnography as well, compare their work with yours. Keep track of all your collected data by indexing your field notes, transcripts, screenshots, and recordings. Write a short summary that includes your conflated key findings as well as raw data to exemplify these, such as quotes, screenshots, or recordings.

Method notes

- Use an indexing system to keep track of your screenshots and screencasts.
- Depending on the country and organization you're working with, do not forget to check what kind of legal, ethical, and confidentiality agreements you need ahead of time. If necessary, communicate them in advance to your research participants. ◀