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antae, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Apr., 2019), 35-50

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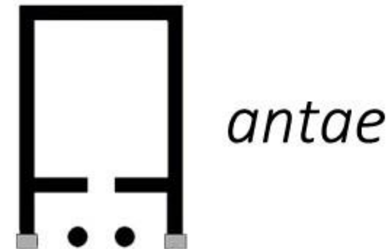

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On the Importance of Netnographic Research in Understanding Young People's Virtual/Real Lives

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Introduction

The world of the internet age is a complex and dynamic environment. Not only has the rise of the internet brought radical changes to the way we live, but it has also alerted social sciences researchers to think about how online communication affects offline relationships. Because the internet can be generally described as a tool people use to interact with one another, it accordingly poses new challenges to human relationships, privacy, and security. In this sense, the internet has changed business, education, government, healthcare, and even the ways in which we interact with our loved ones—in short, it has become one of the key drivers of social evolution.

In a growing digital world where billions of people around the globe are being absorbed by the alluring magic of virtual spaces, with their multimodality and the boundless mobility they offer, old schools in the Humanities have been alarmed by the rapid and uncontrolled change that has made researchers' investigations of human-related phenomena and issues obsolete if carried out in the same way they have been a few decades ago. Most of, if not all, disciplines, branches, and sub-branches in the Humanities have been coupled with the adjective "digital" so that new disciplines are founded to respond to a world that is tremendously digitalised (and this especially in technologically-developed countries like Japan, the United States of America, many European countries, Australia, and South Africa—in a word, the "West"). One can now google the word 'digital' and add it to any discipline: linguistics, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, education, politics, literature, and so on. New sub-branches have forcibly come of age to reflect the deep-rooted infiltration of new technologies and the internet into the most mundane aspects of human life.

More speedily than ever, humanity has been digitalised and digitised due to the merging of new media technologies into every single aspect of people's daily lives.[1] This has led contemporary scholars to ask a long list of questions, but the most significant of their inquiries are the ones closely inspecting how our humanity is, will, or can be expressed in a world shaped by algorithms and bordered with virtual frontiers. An interesting emerging area of research is "netnography" (and this is different from digital ethnography, as will be explained further on). Robert Kozinets first coined the term netnography in 1995 to refer to the online research method which originates in ethnography but which is applied to understanding social interactions in

[1] "Digitisation" and "digitalisation" are two concepts that diverge in significant ways. J. Scott Brennen and Daniel Kreiss, both at the University of North Carolina School of Media and Journalism, define digitisation as the process of changing from analog to digital form, while digitalisation refers to the way in which many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures. See J. Scott Brennen and Daniel Kreiss, 'Digitalization', *Wiley Online Library*, (23 October 2016). <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect111>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].

contemporary communications contexts.[2] According to Kozinets, netnography can be defined as a specific set of research practices related to data collection, analysis, research ethics, and representation, rooted in participant observation. It is thus an interpretive research method that adapts the traditional, in-person participant observation techniques of anthropology to the study of interactions and experiences manifesting through digital communications.[3]

Questioning the significance of this emerging area in a digital age where millions of people spend significant amounts of their daily life online, this article aims at emphasising the relevance of netnography as intersected with other studies related to education from primary to pre-university. A major concern would be the benefits netnography could offer to teachers, educators, parents, and students themselves. By reflecting on the idea that netnography compiles and analyses data about the free social behavior of individuals on the internet, and that most internet users comprise teenagers and younger people, I suggest that researchers in this new field of expertise should also be directed to analyse the behavior of young cybernauts, more specifically with the aim of understanding their behavior when they are online and how this may deeply affect their behavior when they go offline.

The starting point of my reflection on the extent netnography could be helpful in understanding the behavior of students and young people is that, according to Kozinets, netnography was initially founded to analyse the free and online behavior of individuals through using online marketing research techniques to provide useful insights. Rethinking the role this new discipline could play in fields other than marketing and digital studies, the educational realm must also be added to the list of areas of interest to netnographers. For this reason, the present article puts forward the idea of bringing together netnographers, educators, parents, and learners in order to bridge the many technology-based gaps that are distancing older generations from younger ones, particularly in developing countries and in cultures or sub-cultures where (particular strands of) religion and tradition still very much affect the community's lives. In such countries and societies, older people can be described as being still strongly attached to non-internet lifestyles and therefore consider younger people as, for instance, distant or rebellious. This site of contrast and opposition can be bridged through netnography and education.

The following section gives an overview of how the area of netnography has recently emerged and is rapidly mushrooming. It first introduces digital humanities as a wider field of research, the development of which has inspired netnographers, and then explains how digital anthropology as a new field must also be employed in educational studies.

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[2] See Robert V. Kozinets and M. P. Cunningham, 'Chaotic Change, Complexity, and the Emergence of International Strategic Alliances', in *Proceedings of the 1995 AMA Winter Educators' Conference: Marketing Theory and Applications, Volume 6*, ed. by David W. Stewart and Faufel J. Vilcassim (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1995), pp. 431-436.

[3] See Robert V. Kozinets, 'Book Review of D. Owram's *Born at the Right Time*', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 18(3), (1998), 455-457.

Digital humanities, digital anthropology, and netnography: the new disciplines of the Digital Age

Before giving an overall description of what netnography—sometimes referred to as digital or virtual ethnography—is, it is necessary to understand how digital humanities as a wider field of research emerged and expanded. Digital Humanities (henceforth DH) is described as the technology-driven academic field concerned with the application of computational tools and methods to traditional humanities disciplines such as literature, history, and philosophy.

The editors of a companion to DH (who rather abruptly introduced the term "netnography" in 2004 as an expansion of what was previously referred to as "Humanities Computing") argue that the field 'redefined itself to embrace the full range of multimedia'.[4] In *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities*, Steven E. Jones explains how, as a new model, DH emerged more or less concurrently with the novel context associated with developments in technology (such as mobile technologies, web 2.0, social media, and so on), and how the term digital humanities itself was solidified through the aforementioned companion.[5] Jones adds that this is a field that should be thought of as interdisciplinary, or even just as a label of convenience, for what all humanities academics will be doing relatively soon.[6]

Not accurately or fully defined so far, DH can be understood as an umbrella term for a diverse set of practices and concerns, all of which conjoin computing and digital media with humanities research and its teaching. Therefore, instead of a definition, Rafael Alvarado argues that we have a genealogy, a network of family resemblances among provisional schools of thought, methodological interests, and preferred tools, a history of people who have chosen to call themselves digital humanists and who, in the process of trying to define the term, are creating that definition.[7] Alvarado understands DH as a social category, not an ontological one, and is supported by Matt Kirschenbaum, who defined DH in the 2011 Day of Digital Humanities survey as 'a term of tactical convenience'.[8]

For the moment, we know that DH attempts to model the world around us through success and failure in order to arrive at a better understanding of what we know and do not know about humankind and its activities, artifacts, and records. This may in itself serve as a definition of the field.[9] On the other hand, the increasing digital intervention in the field of anthropological inquiry is indisputable. Rather than denying the infiltration of the digital/virtual world into real

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[4] Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, 'The Digital Humanities and Humanities Computing: An Introduction', in *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. xxiii-xxvii, p. xxiii.

[5] Steven E. Jones, *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities* (London, Routledge, 2014), p. 4. This is supported by Matt Kirschenbaum in his article 'What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?', *ADE Bulletin*, 150, (2010), 55-61.

[6] Jones, p. 5.

[7] Rafael Alvarado, 'The Digital Humanities Situation', *The Transducer*, (11 May 2011). <http://transducer.ontoligent.com/?p=717-718>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].

[8] See Kirschenbaum.

[9] For similar definitions, see Melissa Terras, Julianne Nyhan, and Julianne Vanhoutte, eds., *Defining Digital Humanities: A Reader* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013).

life practices, anthropologists are giving significant considerations to materiality at the sites of their research as well as to software as infrastructure. They are also becoming more aware of their own digital research practices as they themselves utilise digital technology to organise, manage, and publish their field findings.

From that perspective, we understand that digital anthropology, as another emerging field, was founded to respond to the adjustments brought about by anthropologists to their field of research in an attempt to cope with the deep infiltration of new media technologies and advancements in human lives. The core tenet of digital anthropology is that one can no longer treat the virtual and the physical as disparate. In fact, it is worth noting that digital anthropology is considered by some researchers as distinct from cyber-anthropology. To put this idea into perspective, the Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar uses the concept of "cyberculture" to analyse fundamental transformations in the structure and significations of "modern" society and culture due to computer information and biological technologies. He argues that, 'as a new domain of anthropological practice, the study of cyberculture is particularly concerned with the cultural construction and reconstruction on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape'.[10] For Escobar, then, the study of cyberculture refers particularly to new technologies in two areas: computer and information technologies, including artificial intelligence, and biotechnologies, including genetic engineering. The first implies bringing about a regime of techno-sociality, a process of socio-cultural construction activated by the new technologies; biotechnologies, on the other hand, is founded on the idea of 'giving rise to biosociality, a new order for the production of life, nature and the body'.[11]

Therefore, one can argue that cyber-anthropology is concerned with new technologies and how they are constructed, implemented, and utilised in society and culture. In this respect, cyber-anthropology is not something completely new. Since the 1950s, anthropologists have been studying new and modern technologies and their impact on (particularly non-Western) societies to an increasing degree.[12]

Identified by Philipp Budka as distinct from cyber-anthropology, digital anthropology, as a sub-discipline, is the study of the consequences of the rise of digital technologies for particular populations, including the use of these technologies within anthropological methodology as well as the study of specific digital technologies.[13] More specifically, the study of digital anthropology has already gone through several iterations. While earlier reviews concentrated on the exploration of online communities (for instance, Wilson and Peterson), later reviews focused more on the ethnographic approach to digital media.[14] A more recent edited collection

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[10] Arturo Escobar, 'Welcome to Cyberia. Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture', *Current Anthropology*, 35(3), (1994), 211-231, p. 211.
[11] ibid.
[12] For more on this, see, for instance: Maurice Godelier, '"Salt Currency" and the Circulation of Commodities Among the Baruya of New Guinea', *Studies in Economic Anthropology*, 7, (1971), 52-73; and Bryan Pfaffenberger, 'Social Anthropology of Technology', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21, (1992), 491-516.
[13] Philipp Budka, 'From Cyber to Digital Anthropology to an Anthropology of the Contemporary?', Working Paper for the *EASA Media Anthropology Network's 38th e-Seminar*, 22 November to 6 December 2011. <http://www.media-anthropology.net/file/budka_contemporary.pdf>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].
[14] See Samuel M. Wilson and Leighton C. Peterson, 'The Anthropology of Online Communities', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, (2002), 449–467.

(Horst and Miller) examines the sheer variety of fields of study, ranging from location to politics to domestic life, as well as the implications for theory and anthropology more generally.[15] Daniel Miller, a pioneer in the study of digital anthropology (and especially ethnographic research on the use and consequences of social media and smartphones as part of everyday life), elucidates that digital anthropology has to contend with the way culture itself has grown in scale and form, including new dreams and new nightmares about who we are becoming, and who or what should be regarded as modern or traditional.[16] For the anthropologist, the digital is always approached in context.

Therefore, and because digital anthropology is primarily concerned with how people interact in the virtual space, new methodologies and techniques should be innovated to successfully contextualise studies of human behavior in the virtual space. This space, one should emphasise, is not a static environment. It is, rather, a world in which we need to know how to research as it continues to develop and change. As such, digital environments are redefining ethnographic practice and, as new technologies offer new ways of engaging with emergent research environments, actual practices of anthropologists shift accordingly.

One way of conducting anthropological research on and in virtual environments is to do it via ethnographical methods. It is interesting to note that most of the attempts to define ethnography as "digital" have been focused in anthropology and sociology; in fact, the increasing digital intervention in the field of ethnographic inquiry is undeniable, and if the role of ethnographers is to examine human interactions, expressions, and other cultural processes, this role must thus itself adapt to the radical changes social life is witnessing. One way of reorienting research interests of ethnographers was through innovating new research methods, as is the case with digital ethnography and netnography.

The latter is a relatively new research method, which adapts the research techniques of ethnography in order to study cultures and communities through computer-mediated communications. The term netnography is a portmanteau combining "internet" or "network" with "ethnography", originally developed as a tool to analyse online fan discussions about the Star Trek franchise. The use of the method spread from marketing research and consumer research to a range of other disciplines—including education, library and information sciences, hospitality, tourism, computer science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, urban studies, leisure and game studies, and human sexuality and addiction research.

In 2012, Kozinets defined four principles which should be followed when conducting netnographic research, where the researcher should: (i) fully disclose his or her presence to the online community members which he or she is studying; (ii) guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of the informants; (iii) seek and incorporate feedback from the online community members; and (iv) ask community members' permission to directly quote any specific

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[15] See Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, *Digital Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

[16] See Daniel Miller, 'Digital Anthropology', in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. by F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, et. al., (28 August, 2018). <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/digital-anthropology>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].

posting.[17] On this last point, however, Kozinets (2010) previously acknowledged that it could be ethically just to study some online communities without asking permission to study them.[18]

In this next section, a short description of the main netnographic research method principles will be discussed.

On the netnographic research method

In terms of digital anthropology, the virtual world is deemed to be more complex to understand and investigate than the non-online context because people's online identities, profiles, and personal information are not always authentic and reliable. In an article published with The Guardian, it is argued that although we are more than the history of our browser, it is feasible that our web searches and web page visits, emails, and social network activity contain traces of our personality.[19] These traces may not always exist when it comes to young people; in fact, it has become common that younger people share a wide range of information about themselves on social media sites because the sites themselves are designed to encourage the sharing of information and the expansion of networks. However, as evidenced by a report published with the PEW Research Centre, one can notice that few younger people embrace a fully public approach to social media.[20]

Therefore, in doing research on the internet (both "about" and "from" the internet), many data collecting methods both quantitative and qualitative have been used and innovated (with quantitative surveys being the most frequently deployed). More precisely, there are two major methodologies for collecting data through surveys in a virtual world: the avatar managed by the researcher invites random or specific avatars to participate in the research and then apply the survey, or applying the survey through bots.[21] Amongst the qualitative ones, ethnography has been the most used. Due to its social character, the internet has allowed the emergence of virtual cultures and the ethnographic method 'can therefore be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it'.[22, 23]

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[17] See Robert V. Kozinets, 'Marketing Netnography: Prom/ot(ulgat)ing a New Research Method', *Methodological Innovations Online*, 7(1), (2012), 37-45.
[18] See Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (London: Sage, 2010).
[19] See Tomas Chamorro-Premuzik, 'How different are your online and offline personalities?', *The Guardian*, (24 September 2015). <https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/sep/24/online-offline-personality-digital-identity>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].
[20] See Mary Madden, Amanda Lenhart, Sandra Cortesi, et. al., 'Teens, Social Media, and Privacy', *PEW Research Centre*, (21 May 2013). <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/05/21/teens-social-media-and-privacy/>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].
[21] See Cátia Ferreira, 'Exploring Virtual Worlds: Conducting a Netnographic Research in *Second Life*', *Estudos em Comunicação*, 18, (2015), 35-59.
[22] Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 3.
[23] It should be here noted that a variety of terms are used for ethnographic approaches to online or digitally focused studies, from online and virtual ethnography to netnography, but it appears that uncertainty over their use is common. However, among the ethnographic methods, virtual ethnography and netnography are the most frequently used. See Robert V. Kozinets, 'Me/my research/avatar', *Journal of Business Research*, 65, (2012), 478-482.

Because millions of people around the globe are now using online communities (such as newsgroups, blogs, vlogs, forums, Facebook and many other social networking sites), the virtual world has now become an important field for research. For anthropologists and ethnographers, it has become almost compulsory and unavoidable to do research on and with the internet—but how does one carry out an ethnography of the internet and its users? In fact, the basic tenet in traditional anthropology is to step "off the veranda" to experience life from the informants' point of view, and this has long offered a holistic approach to studying society. However, is it possible to transfer this same approach to studying how social interactions manifest themselves online?

In fact, virtual spaces—and social media in particular—are often accessed by researchers to observe the participant in their "natural" environment. The online environment often comprises text, images, or videos, and plays host to social interactions and behavioural patterns. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, for example, are common digital spaces which researchers access with the objective of observing how particular groups of internet users interact and behave.

Subsequently, it is argued by contemporary anthropologists, such as Miller and Horst, that internet-based social media must be studied as unbounded yet locally-specific social spaces. From this perspective, many researchers from diverse fields opt to use netnography as a research method to understand social interactions in the virtual world. As a 'specialized form of ethnography' adapted to the Internet, netnography might be one of the most viable methods to use when internet-related phenomena are studied.[24]

According to Kozinets and others, the foundation of netnography is rather simple.[25] It is grounded by the principle that the perspective of an embodied and temporally-, historically-, and culturally-situated human being with anthropological training is, for purposes relating to identity, language, ritual, imagery, symbolism, subculture, and many other elements that require cultural understanding, a far better analyst of people's contemporary online experience than a disembodied algorithm programmed by statistics and marketing research scientists. According to the study conducted by Crow, Bardsley and Wiles (2011) on innovation and social research methods, netnography is among the exemplary innovative methods developed within qualitative research.[26] In order to be considered an exemplary case study, methodologies should facilitate the study of a new area of social life, providing an understanding of the aspects of social life that are difficult to access through traditional methods and dealing with ethical access or response issues raised by traditional approaches. This was what netnography is believed to be able to do.

On the other hand, Kozinets argues that the netnographic approach is adapted to help the researcher study not only forums, chatlogs, and newsgroups but also blogs, virtual worlds,

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[24] Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, p. 4.

[25] See Robert V. Kozinets, Diane Scaraboto, and Marie-Agnès Parmentier, 'Evolving netnography: how brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-than-human netnography can transform your research', *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(3-4), (2018), 231-242.

[26] Graham Crow, Nicholas Bardsley, and Rose Wiles, 'Methodological innovation and developing understandings of 21st century society', *21st Century Society*, 4(2), (2009), 115-118.

networked game players, mobile communities, social networking sites, and audiovisual, photographic, and podcasting communities.[27] The netnographic method is based on traditional participant-observation ethnographic procedures, and is generally conducted in six overlapping steps, similar to the stages of ethnographic research: developing a research plan, establishing entrée, collecting and triangulating data, analysing and interpreting data, ensuring ethical standards, and reporting on research findings and associated insights.

To conduct netnographic research, then, there emerge these main steps: research plan, entrée, data collection, data analysis, and presentation then discussion of the results. The first step includes setting the goals, choosing the research object, and defining the research question. The entrée implies the identification of the community that will be studied, and the "entrance" into that community. The researcher then needs to select suitable methods for their qualitative analysis. As for the data that the netnographer collects from their observation of a given virtual environment, Ferreira explains that there are three types of data one can collect: archival data (data produced by the members of the community), elicited data (resulting from the interaction between the researcher and the members of the culture under analysis), and fieldnote data (resulting from the experiences lived by the researcher).[28] The fourth stage is data analysis; the researcher should decide what technique is the most appropriate to analyse the collected data. The fifth, and last, step concerns the presentation and discussion of the results.

In netnography, a significant amount of the data originates in and manifests through the digital traces of naturally occurring public conversations recorded by contemporary communications networks. Netnography uses these conversations as data since, as previously discussed, it is an interpretive research method that adapts the traditional, in-person participant observation techniques of anthropology to the study of interactions and experiences manifesting through digital communications. Though netnography is developed from ethnography and applied in the online settings, it is more than the application of qualitative research in the form of traditional ethnographic techniques in an online context. There are several characteristics that differentiate netnography from ethnography: netnography offers a less intrusive research experience than ethnography, because netnography uses mainly observational data, and netnographic research is more focused on reflections and data provided by online communities whereas ethnography can focus on the entire human society. Ethnography comprises research into all forms of human communication, including body language and tone of voice, while netnography incorporates human online communication, which includes textual as well as multimedia communication.

In a same vein, it is argued that the main advantage of netnography is that online participants—or what can be called "netformants", referring to virtual informants—reveal information, as well as sensitive details, in a manner that is both natural and voluntary; the netnographer, therefore, could gain this organic information through observation. Compared with traditional ethnography, which requires researchers to physically immerse themselves into the samples to collect data, netnography allows the researcher to be able to download communication data

[27] See Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, p. 3.
[28] See Ferreira, p. 10.

directly from an online community. In this sense, netnographic researchers do not become members of communities and cultures as in traditional ethnographic practice, but rather are engaged in various and flexible levels of committed and public online social interaction.

That being said, it is foreseeable that netnographers will play a significant role in bridging the gap between teenagers, their teachers and parents. In what follows, I will explain how netnography can give an insight into the unexplored and unfamiliar behavior of young people who live, it can be said, as avatars in the virtual world and as marginalised human beings in real life, especially in conservative societies.

A netnographic exploration of young people's lives as socio-virtual beings

In this concluding section, the aim is to draw the readers' attention to the way extensive uses of new technologies and the internet affects teenagers' behavior. In fact, the focus here shall be on youngsters and young adults' use of new technologies; although older generations use technology and the internet in similar manners, even with the same frequency, it is teenagers and young adults who are on the receiving end of educational systems, and not the adults outside of them. Furthermore, the former are in the course of building their personality, identity and subjectivity (through school, family, friends) while older adults may be, generally speaking, more stable and self-cohesive.

In this section there is an attempt to shape how netnographers could contribute to understanding and interpreting young people's online/offline behavior in order to narrow down the gap between teenagers and adults, and to reduce the tension that is mounting and affecting many social relationships: students-teacher relationship, parents-children relationship, and friendship. David Zemmels states that in today's postmodern society, the media has become as important as food and clothing.[29] It plays a significant role in "informing" society and, notably, the current generation of young people spends more time engaging with (social, online) media than any other activity. This, in effect, can be said to position teenagers into living a double life, often leading to constant feelings of bewilderment, estrangement, and alienation in their real life communities while fostering a strong sense of belonging to these virtual communities.

According to Maslow, after the physiological needs for survival, safety, and security have been satisfied, the individual can be motivated to meet the needs represented at higher levels of the pyramid.[30] These are the needs associated with love and belonging. These desires are met through satisfactory relationships—with family members, friends, peers, classmates, teachers, and other people with whom individuals interact—which imply acceptance by others. However, with the emergence of the internet, individuals are given an entirely new stage on which to live their lives, and diverse (virtual) communities to belong to. This new environment is quite different from that of the world observed by Maslow as he developed his hierarchy of needs back in the twentieth century. Nowadays, arguably, virtual environments allow

[29] See David Zemmels, 'Youth and New Media', *Communication Research*, 31(4), (2012), 4-22.
[30] See Abraham Maslow, 'A Theory of Human Motivation', *Psychological Review*, 50(4), (1943), 370-396.

individuals to explore facets of their personality that they would not be willing to reveal in less anonymous circumstances. The world of the internet allows people, mainly youngsters, to build hundreds of new relationships in cyberspace, and the effects of these relationships on young people are in many ways different from what is underscored through Maslow's theory.

In fact, most young people go online to communicate with friends and e-friends (virtual friends) whom they have never met physically. This virtual communication is an important foundation of social relationships, though the latter is not based on face-to-face conversations and contact. Most of the communications that people have online are on social networks, and particularly and mostly on Facebook, currently the most popular of all social media websites. One important feature of these communications is that they are virtual interactions. Sherry Turkle, a psychologist and expert on the social effects of virtual communication, writes the following in the introduction to her book:

> As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection. And they report feelings of closeness when they are paying little attention. In all of this, there is a nagging question: Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters, of any kind?[31]

Turkle's words reveal that the many relationships one can build online may nonetheless make the person at their core feel lonely. In the same vein, and according to many contemporary psychologists, one of the most worrying features of social media is that it arguably allows its users to become different people. This is worsened when the user is a teenager, since adolescence is seen primarily as a state of transition, a matter of 'becoming' rather than 'being'.[32] And since a larger part of young people's lived experiences, mainly in industrialised countries and urban cities, is the frequent exposure and often daily use of a variety of media, it is of paramount importance to question and reflect on the process of socialisation of twenty-first century teenagers in light of the extensive use of new technologies.

Psychology and sociology scholars often describe socialisation as a process whereby an individual learns the norms, values, behavior and social skills appropriate to one's social context and position. It also refers to the process by which young people acquire various patterns of cognitions and behaviors. Therefore, it is understood that the process of socialisation is one that never ends but which nonetheless most influenced during childhood and adolescence. When investigating how socialisation shapes the individual's social life, psychologists acknowledge the crucial role that family, culture, school, and peer groups play in influencing the pattern of socialisation in children and teenagers. However, since the late twentieth century and beginning of the new millennium, another factor has emerged as a more powerful agent

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[31] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology* and *Less From Each Other* (New York NY: Basic Books, 2012), p. xxxix.

[32] Patricia Giardiello, 'Youth identities: Media discourse in the formation of youth identity', in *Language, Identity and Symbolic Culture*, ed. by David Evans (London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 84-101, p. 92.

and influencing variable affecting the socialisation of a child: the internet as a virtual satisfaction of innate needs.[33]

By the same token, psychologists have recently added a new facet to this most contemporary form of socialization. With others, Diane Parente claims that technology-socialisation is to a large extent accomplished via personal experience, especially when the internet usage is specific, such as for entertainment or communication of information.[34] Twenty-first century teenagers and children have grown up in an environment pervaded by advanced technologies, and, as Martin Lindstrom and Patricia Seybold state, today's children are as comfortable being online as they are when offline.[35] Nowadays, because of an overabundance of social media networks, teenagers and children have a virtual presence in virtual sites like Facebook, Snapchat, Skype, WhatsApp, and others. This, I contend, virtualises teenagers and makes them live a social life lived on two connected yet disparate realms.

Furthermore, and according to the PEW Research Center, 77% of teen social media users agree that people are less authentic and real when they log in to social media.[36] Therefore, it is of high importance to question how young people view virtual relationships on social media—and one need only recall the many examples of catfishing, for instance, that have occurred in recent years. Many social media users may believe that social media allows people to befriend others they have not yet met as if they were one from the physical social realm. That part of teenagers' life, and therefore identity, is constructed in a virtual and unreal world shaped by unreal relationships, and certainly affects their physically embodied social identity.

It is in this sense and from this perspective that educators and parents—that is, adults who may find it difficult to understand and communicate with younger people—need to dive into this seemingly hidden part of teenager's life. The first aspect that adults must grasp is the fact that today's teenagers and preteens belong to the digital natives' generation. Even in developing countries where technological advancements are still at their embryonic stage, an important number of teenagers do have the opportunity to own electronic devices and gain access to internet at an early age. This makes of them a generation born into a world that is digital, where electronic devices represent the first language they speak and think in. However, there are those less privileged young people in the same community who were not born into this world. These are the digital immigrants who may be familiar with new technologies, but which came to them later in life. It is decisive to know, then, if the youngster is a digital native or digital immigrant when one wants to understand their behavior based on their relationship with and dependence on new technologies and the internet.

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[33] See Megha and Yogendra Bhatt, 'Internet as Influencing Variable in Child's Socialization: A Review', *Journal of Computer Science and Mobile Computing*, 4(4), (2015), 75-80.
[34] See Diane Parente, Matthew E. Swinarski, and Kathleen Noce, 'Socialization To The Internet: Who Is Teaching Our Children', *International Journal of Management & Information Systems*, 13(2), (2011), 11-20.
[35] Martin Lindstrom and Patricia B. Seybold, *BRANDchild: Insights into the Minds of Today's Global Kids: Understanding Their Relationship with Brands* (London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2004), p. 1.
[36] Amanda Lenhart, 'Teens, Technology and Friendships', (6 August 2015). <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/teens-technology-and-friendships/>. See especially 'Chapter 4: Social Media and Friendships', (6 August 2015). <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/chapter-4-social-media-and-friendships/>. [Both accessed 1 March 2019].

One major difference between digital natives and digital immigrants is that digital natives create information and information in turn creates and shapes them. They live in a culture which is mediated.[37] Their identities are mediated by a constant stream of information coming from a wide range of sources, and virtual activity enables these young people to experiment with different personas. Moreover, and more importantly, for digital natives, the mass of their information is often not obtained in schools or libraries but rather from virtual settings like instant messaging, e-mailing friends, visiting social networking websites, blogs, and wikis. Even the nature of the information obtained in the virtual world is distinct. To explain further, Nicholas Carr argues that the net is making us more superficial thinkers due to its perpetual and constant distraction.[38] This permanent and constant distraction, by moving so fast from website to website and by looking for so much information in a short time, does affect the way digital natives think, and thus, instead of a linear thinking, theirs is rather a more fragmented type of reasoning. This fact is completely denied or ignored by previous generations, those who are digital immigrants or even digital outsiders. It has thus become imperative for parents, educators and young people themselves to understand this, and, to decipher and comprehend the behavior of young people who have been profoundly affected by the extensive use of new technologies, parents and educators must leap into action. One of the ways to do that could be offered by netnographers.

Social media users may find more freedom in expressing their opinions via their "likes", "dislikes", and "comments" than is possible in real life situations, and this could provide researchers with much data that can be followed over the long-term; additionally, this may also enable netnographers to follow and quantify changes over time by using analytic tools and methods to generate insights. Just as ethnographic research includes an analysis of communication patterns and content within the online social contexts, this activity is also a netnographic technique of analysis. According to Kozinets, 'these social groups have a "real" existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour, including consumer behavior'.[39] As a matter of fact, netnography is uniquely positioned among social media research methods to generate cultural insights from contextualised rather than quantified data.

In this respect, educational institutions may need netnogaphers to conduct research with their students. If netnographers are given access to the accounts of social media, or even platforms where students interact virtually, they could gather as much data as possible which would then be analysed thoroughly and systematically. Doing so, netnographers would explore how the virtual socialisation process affects the behavior of teenagers by tracing their online conversations, comments, and even the emojis they use (emoticons are recognised and processed by the brain as nonverbal information, which means one may read them as emotional

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[37] See, for instance, Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the media shapes your world and the way you live in it* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).
[38] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallow: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), p. 12.
[39] See Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, p. 366.

communication rather than verbal).[40] Netnographers could trace the use of emojis and other virtual interaction tools to understand the way teenagers develop their virtual emotional intelligence, and how the latter deeply affects young people's relationships with others in a non-virtual context, mainly with parents and teachers.

It might seem unfeasible and impractical to extract data from students' social media accounts since these may be viewed as falsified. However, recent research has theorised that social media profiles are very revealing in terms of people's personalities. Joseph Cilona, a clinical psychologist, relationship expert, and social media guru states: 'Although [Facebook] is still in its infancy, research into social media is beginning to illuminate strong and significant relationships between personality and online behavior', adding how '[m]ost of the existing research indicates a strong correlation between various aspects of self-concept and self-esteem to online behavior'.[41] Therefore, profile picture choice, the use of emojis, new timeline posts or stories, statuses or tweets can be significant for netnographers to investigate online/offline behavior of youngsters.[42]

Another possibility for netnographers to observe and get data on teenagers' online behavior is through academic and learning platforms like Edmodo.[43] Here, it is the role of the teacher to get the students to register and log into the website regularly so that the netnographer would be able to trace their online activity. Although Edmodo and other educational platforms are more formal, thus meaning that online behavior of youngsters is restricted, netnographers could make interesting observations on the way they interact with their teachers both virtually and formally. These observations could be extended to the classroom in order to observe and read the differences between online teacher-student interactions and in-class teacher-student interactions.

To recapitulate, the extensive use of new technologies and the constant online presence of a younger, more technologically-attuned generation make it impossible to deny the deep fusion between our virtual interactions and our real life. Unarguably, the latter has had a drastic impact on the way people communicate with each other because of technology's integral role in contemporary society. More importantly, virtual communications have increasingly taken the place of face-to-face interactions, mainly among young people in the West, and now many adult individuals fear that younger generations may be too immersed in this "digital world" and not present enough in the "real world". Whether or not this fear is reasonable is precisely why netnographic research into the area is needed. Thus, instead of rejecting the new ways through which the younger generations communicate, one must understand the many nuances of these fundamental changes.

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[40] See Daantje Derks, Arjan E.R. Bos, Jasper von Grumbkow. 'Emoticons and social interaction on the Internet: the importance of social context', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23(1), 2007, 842–849.

[41] See *CBS News*, 'What Your Facebook Activity Says About You'. <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/what-your-facebook-activity-says-about-you/>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].

[42] The practical and ethical difficulties involved in such investigations must be kept in mind.

[43] Edmodo is an educational technology platform that enables teachers to share content, distribute quizzes, assignments, and manage communication with students, colleagues, and parents.

One effective method for understanding how the virtualisation of young people's life is affecting their social life is netnography. The latter would serve in observing the online behavior of young people and relate this to offline behavior and interactions. In the present paper, I aimed at exposing the relevance and significance of the role that netnographers could play in educational institutions. This research, though it lacks a case study through which results could have been validated, is a good initiative towards thinking of new emerging fields in the humanities that look closely at the strong influence of the digitalisation of our life. Here is also proposed the idea that netnographers should be hired in educational institutions so as to explore the online behavior of students with the aim of analysing and interpret it; it is this analysis and/or interpretation that might help educators and parents better understand and communicate with the generation they are responsible for.

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