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Q3(a)

How do you view and assess the increasing trend of digital ethnography and the use of visual culture in sociological research?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Define **digital ethnography** and visual culture as research materials and methods
- **Assess promises:** access, new fields, images as data
- **Assess problems:** ethics, consent, representation, platform power and the loss of co-presence
- Give a reasoned view, not a gadget review

Revision summary

Digital ethnography follows social life on platforms with ethnographic patience.

Visual culture treats images and video as data and as a mode of presentation.

The trend matches a world where kinship, politics and markets are already mediated.

Promises include access to networks, movements and everyday visual politics.

Problems include consent, platform sampling, stereotype and loss of co-presence.

The methods are necessary if they stay disciplined, and weak if they become screenshot dumps.

Introduction

Digital ethnography studies social life as it is lived on platforms, messaging groups and online worlds, using the same patience that older ethnography used in a village or a factory. Visual culture in research means treating photographs, video, memes and screens as data, and sometimes as a way of showing results. Both trends have grown quickly. A sociological assessment must weigh what they add to knowledge and what they risk.

Body

What the trend is

Classic ethnography, after Malinowski, asked the researcher to live among people and to learn their point of view. **Digital ethnography**, in the work of scholars such as Daniel Miller and later internet ethnographers, follows people into WhatsApp families, gaming worlds, caste groups and political feeds. It may be purely online, or it may mix online and offline, which many Indian researchers now do because kinship and politics already mix the two. **Visual sociology**, from earlier uses of the camera in fieldwork to today's study of selfies and political video, treats the image as a social fact, not as a decoration. John Berger's writing on seeing, and

later work on media events, sit in the background. The trend is increasing because so much interaction is now mediated.

Promises

- **The methods open fields that a village stay cannot reach:** diaspora networks, hidden fandoms, troll farms, and the everyday visual politics of rumour. They can record interaction that would vanish in a notebook. They suit the study of social movements that organise on Telegram or Instagram. They can democratise who is seen, if local people hold the camera. For Indian sociology, digital caste publics, online marriage markets and campaign videos are now ordinary objects. Mixed with older fieldwork, they give a fuller map of how honour, class and the state are performed.

Problems and a view

Ethics are sharp. A public tweet is not always meant for a thesis. Consent, lurking, and the use of images of minors or of the dead raise duties that survey ethics codes only partly cover. Platforms already watch the watcher. Algorithms sample the world for the researcher. Visual material can aestheticise poverty or freeze a stereotype. Clifford Geertz's warning about interpretation still applies: a meme is not self-explanatory. Co-presence, smell, fear and the long wait of fieldwork can be lost if the researcher never leaves the screen. Digital methods can also over-represent the connected urban user and miss those who live at the edge of the network.

My assessment is that **digital ethnography** and visual culture are now necessary tools, not toys. They should remain ethnographic in discipline: long engagement, contrary cases, and an account of how the data were produced. They should not replace face-to-face work where bodies, land and offices still organise power. Used with those limits, they strengthen sociological research. Used as a dump of screenshots, they weaken it.

How I would use them in a study

Suppose the object is a caste association's marriage campaign, or a farmers' protest. The visual record of posters, live streams and forwarded clips is part of how honour and grievance are made. A researcher should log how those images circulate, who edits them, and which audiences they never reach. Then the same researcher should sit in the office, the langar or the court queue. **Digital ethnography** without that second step will overstate the loudest users. Visual culture without theory will treat a photograph as proof rather than as a social performance. The increasing trend is welcome as an expansion of the field. It is unwelcome as a fashion that forgets ethics, time and the offline organisation of power.

Flow diagram

Digital ethnography -> Platforms groups feeds
Visual culture -> Photos video memes
Digital ethnography -> Access new fields
Visual culture -> Access new fields
Digital ethnography -> Ethics algorithms representation
Visual culture -> Ethics algorithms representation

Conclusion

Digital ethnography and visual culture extend fieldwork into mediated life and treat images as social data. They add access and new objects. They bring ethical, algorithmic and representational risks. The sound view is to use them with the old ethnographic duties of consent, context and time.

Facts & figures

Digital ethnography

Sustained interpretive study of online or blended social worlds, not a one-day browse of a site.

Visual sociology

The use of images as evidence about social relations, and the study of how societies see.

Consent problem

Material that is technically public may still be ethically private, especially for vulnerable groups.

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