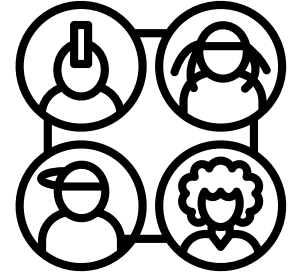


HOW TO CONDUCT A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY



WHAT IS DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

Digital ethnography is a sociological research method where we study how people interact, form identities, and create communities online. Instead of sitting in a café or hanging out at a gig to observe a youth subculture, you explore digital spaces like TikTok trends, Reddit threads, Instagram hashtags, or Discord servers.

Sociologists use digital ethnography to understand how young people express themselves, resist mainstream culture, and build connections in an online world. For example, studying TikTok’s “cottagecore” community can show how young people reimagine rural life as a form of escapism, or how drill music fan pages highlight urban identity and resistance.

How Do You Do It?

Just like traditional ethnography, you need to:

Choose your field site

- Pick a subculture or online community to observe (e.g., skateboarding on Reddit, “alt” aesthetics on TikTok, grime music on Instagram).

Become an observer, not a participant

- For classroom research, you are only observing—do not post or interact. This keeps your work ethical and safe.

Collect your data

- Watch, scroll, read, and take careful notes. Look for patterns in:
 - Language/slang (in-jokes, acronyms, hashtags)
 - Symbols (fashion, emojis, memes, aesthetics)
 - Norms/values (what’s admired, what’s mocked, how people act “authentic”)
 - Deviance/resistance (how they challenge mainstream culture)

Analyse and reflect

- Ask: What does this tell us about youth identity? How does online life compare to offline youth cultures?

How to Collate Your Findings

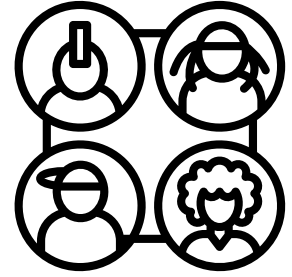
- Group notes: Each group member should focus on different themes (e.g., one tracks language, another symbols).
- Pull together data: Combine your observations into one table.
- Look for patterns: Do multiple examples show the same thing? Are there contradictions?
- Summarise: Write a short paragraph for each theme using your evidence.

Top Tips for Success

- Be systematic: Don’t just scroll aimlessly. Decide what you’re looking for.
- Keep it ethical: No screenshots of usernames; anonymise anything you record.
- Stay focused: Online spaces can be distracting—stick to your subculture.
- Look for depth: A single post is not enough—observe across several posts/threads.
- Compare and contrast: Think about how online identity differs from real-world youth cultures.



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DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY DATA COLLECTION SHEET

Name:

Group:

Subculture/online community studied:

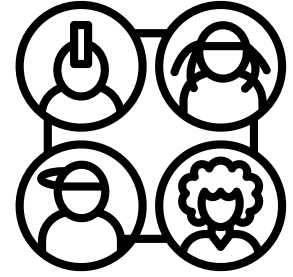
Platform/sources (e.g., Reddit, TikTok, Instagram, Discord):

Source tracking

Post/Thread/Hashtag /channel	Platform	Date/Time Access	Notes (E.g., Content, meme, video, thread)



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DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY DATA COLLECTION SHEET

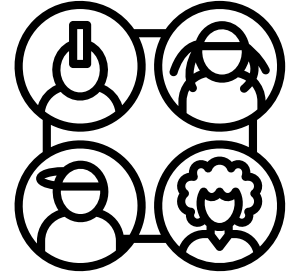
Data collection framework

Theme (E.g., Language, symbols, norms/values/, resistance or deviance)	Example Evidence (quote, screenshot description, observation)	Interpretation (what does it mean about the subculture?)



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DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY DATA COLLECTION SHEET



Patterns Noticed

Are there repeated ideas, images, or behaviours across different posts?

Do you notice contradictions or disagreements within the subculture?

Reflection Questions

What does this online community reveal about youth identity?

How does the subculture's online presence compare with offline youth subcultures (e.g., music scenes, fashion, friendships)?

What challenges did you face while observing online communities (e.g., too much content, unclear meaning, ethical issues)?

