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Using digital ethnography to research embodied information practices on social media

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper discusses the use of digital ethnography to research the embodied information practices of ultrarunners. The paper considers the challenges of digital ethnography and explores how embodied and immersive methods could bring the body into digital ethnography.

Method. Digital ethnographic methods have been used as part of ongoing research exploring how ultrarunners use the affordances of social media to share embodied information. Participant observation and interviews have been the main methods of data collection.

Discussion. Embodied information can present challenges for the researcher as it is information which is difficult to access beyond the moment of practice. Reflection on use of digital ethnography has highlighted the importance of methods which bring the body into research.

Conclusion(s). Turning to sensory, embodied and immersive methods can support deeper understanding of embodied information practices. The paper highlights the value of ongoing reflection on methodological issues to address the challenges of researching embodied information.

Introduction

This paper discusses the use of digital ethnography to research embodied information practices as represented on social media. The paper forms part of doctoral research which aims to understand how ultrarunners use the affordances of social media to share embodied information (Williams et al., 2024). Ultrarunning is a form of endurance running, involving psychological and physiological challenges. Although running is a physical practice, engagement with digital cultures has become an increasingly important part of running for many people (Couture, 2021; Gorichanaz, 2018; Kurtoğlu-Hooton, 2021). Ultrarunners use social media platforms to represent their experiences through vlogging and photo sharing (Williams et al., 2024).

Embodied information presents challenges for researchers; bodies produce ways of knowing that can be difficult to put into words and hard to access beyond the moment of practice (Bonner and Lloyd, 2011; Lloyd, 2010). Information behaviour researchers have turned to ethnography and autoethnography as methodologies which allow exploration of embodied information (Cox et al., 2017). Whilst ethnography is becoming increasingly adopted as a methodology in information science, there is currently limited discussion of the challenges or limitations of the approach (Carlsson et al., 2013). Griffin (2017) argues that ethnography is often used ambiguously or without detailed discussion of the methodological position. This paper aims to explore the following questions concerning methodological approaches for embodied information:

1. What are the challenges of using digital ethnographic methods for researching embodied information practices?
2. How can embodied and sensory methods be incorporated into digital ethnographic methodologies?

Turning to the literature as part of a reflective process has resulted in rich insights about the methodological challenges experienced whilst researching the ultrarunning community on Instagram. I reflect on the limitations of digital ethnography for engaging with embodied information and how embodied or sensory methods could enable the researcher to engage with embodied information. This paper responds to Griffin's call for a more detailed discussion of methodological issues in information science, contributing new insight into the methodological challenges of digital ethnography in the context of embodied information.

Ethnography and digital ethnography

Ethnography is an iterative, inductive and reflexive methodology which uses a range of methods to develop understanding of the behaviours, beliefs and practices of cultural groups (O'Reilly, 2008, 2012; Creswell, 2018). Describing and interpreting culturally significant practices is central to the philosophy of ethnographic research (Wolcott, 1990). It is important to acknowledge ethnography is a research philosophy rather than a single method, and can involve using a range of methods such as participant observation and interviewing (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). Conceptualisations of ethnography for researching digital platforms have evolved, resulting in an overlapping and messy array of terminology; virtual ethnography, Internet ethnography, social media ethnography, netnography and digital ethnography. I selected Pink et al.'s (2016) digital ethnography as the methodology for this research. Digital ethnography is a repurposing of conventional ethnographic concepts for a digital environment whilst acknowledging that the phenomenon under investigation is not bound exclusively to the digital (Pink et al., 2016). Digital ethnography can be a messy method fraught with discomfort (Abidin and De Seta, 2020). Ethical issues dominate discussions about the challenges of researching social media (Gliniecka, 2023; Gerrard, 2021). Visual content presents challenges concerning consent, anonymity and copyright (De Seta, 2020; Warfield et al., 2019; Winter and Lavis, 2020).

Ethnography and embodied information

Ethnography has been increasingly used as a methodology for examining embodied information practices across a range of different contexts: for example, archaeology (Olsson, 2016), car restoration (Lloyd and Olsson, 2019), religious practices (Guzik, 2018), martial arts (Olsson and Hansson, 2019), traditional crafts (Agyemang and Wessels, 2022) and long-distance hiking (Hyatt, 2016; Innocenti, 2024; Munro et al., 2022). Studies of long-distance hiking have used the traditional ethnographic approach of in-person participation. Munro et al. (2022) conducted interviews with hikers at various points along a long-distance trail. Innocenti (2024) discusses conducting ethnographic interviews, conducted on the trail with walkers, as well as keeping a research diary using text, photos and audio recordings.

Participation by the researcher in the practice under investigation is a common theme throughout many of these papers, which contributes to rich debates around levels of participation in ethnographic research. McCurdy and Uldam (2014) highlight how insider-outsider and overt-covert positions shift throughout research. Researchers are often already participants in the practice; for example, Olsson and Hansson (2019) are martial artists whilst Innocenti (2024) is a hiker. Autoethnography has been used to give more attention to the embodied experiences of the researcher (Gorichanaz, 2015). Researchers also integrate themselves into the fieldsite, moving from outsider to insider by learning a new skill (Agyemang and Wessels, 2022). Methodological issues include researcher positionality and insider-outsider status. In their study on embodied information practices of martial artists, Olsson and Hansson (2019) consider the implications of an insider status in ethnographic work. Both authors are practitioners in martial arts and reflexively interrogate how this shapes the study's findings. There is limited discussion or use of ethnographic methodologies to research embodied information in a digital context in the information science literature.

Applying digital ethnography to ultrarunning on Instagram

This section of the paper outlines how digital ethnography has been used in ongoing doctoral research. The research uses ethnographic methods, underpinned by Pink et al.'s (2016) digital ethnography but also draws upon ideas from immersive research (Matthews, 2021) and embodied research (Chong Kwan, 2022; Matthews, 2015; Thanem and Knights, 2019). Immersive research is '*a methodology that emphasises participation, involvement and immersion*' (Matthews, 2021, p. 41). Embodied research encourages use of the body as a tool for investigation through embodied participation (Thanem and Knights, 2019).

Focusing on Instagram as the fieldsite, the research has involved two main phases of data collection: immersive participant observation on Instagram and semi-structured interviews. Observational data was collected using observational notes, a reflective research diary and the thematic analysis of 117 Instagram posts, gathered through daily use of Instagram. Kozinets' (2020) recommendations to consider relevance, diversity and richness were criteria for selecting posts for analysis. Data was analysed using an iterative-inductive approach, recognising that data collection, analysis and writing are intertwined activities in ethnographic research (O'Reilly, 2012). The observation phase focused on mapping out information practices in terms of who was sharing information, what information was shared and how information was shared. The observation phase was followed by nineteen semi-structured interviews with ultrarunners, coaches and content creators. The aim of using the interview method is to build further understanding of experiences of creating, sharing and using embodied information. Findings from the immersive participant observation informed the development of the interview questions. The observation data also informed the sampling of interview participants: for example, coaches were included in the sample of interview participants after observation highlighted this group as playing a role in creating and sharing information about running on Instagram.

The immersive aspect of this research was about being a participant in the information practices of runners on social media platforms. I was regularly scrolling, searching and viewing content whilst also using Instagram to document and reflect on my practices of running using photographs and reflective journaling. Although observations did not occur in the moment of practice with runners, embodied information remained accessible in various forms through the videos and photographs encountered on the platform. Ultrarunners share videos captured *on the run*, granting access to a wealth of sensory information: heavy breathing, running shoes hitting the ground and sounds of wind and rain. This data is sensorial despite being accessed in a digital fieldsite. Even observing visual information is a sensory experience. The sensory aspect of viewing and listening to embodied information as an observer begins to bring an aspect of embodied research to the work. After reflecting upon observation as a method, it was decided that greater use of embodied approaches could support deeper understanding. Following the example of Glatt (2023) who became a YouTuber to understand how it feels to be a content creator, this might be achieved by becoming a running content creator myself. Engagement with the practices observed in my research such as filming on the run could close the gap between observation and embodied experience to generate insights about the embodied experiences of information creation.

The reflective diary used to record experiences and reflections was shared on Instagram, resulting in a more participatory role in the fieldsite. Taking a participatory role through transparent reflections can be a useful way to explore researcher subjectivity (Olive, 2013). Being open with reflections became important partway through data collection when I sustained a serious running injury which meant a shift in my identity as a runner. Abidin's (2020) recommendation for critical reflection on performances of visibility a researcher positionality shift was followed to account for the impact of injury. Injury disrupted both my identity as a runner and challenged my ability to bring my body into the research through embodied methods. Although I wanted to incorporate embodied sensory methods alongside digital ethnography, becoming an injured runner altered my level of participation in running and my reflections became more about my experiences as an injured runner.

The challenges of using digital ethnographic methods for embodied information practices

According to Cibangu (2012), digital ethnography can also mean losing access to sensory and experiential aspects compared to traditional ethnography. Many of the studies of embodied information discussed earlier in this paper involved active participation in practices by researchers; for example, collecting data on the trails (Munro, 2022) or becoming an apprentice to a weaver (Agyemang and Wessels, 2022). However, this research had a digital focus, which could result in losing access to embodied aspects. It is important to reflect on how the digital fieldsite changes access and engagement with sensory and experiential aspects of the phenomena. If bodies produce ways of knowing that can be hard to access beyond the moment of practice, can embodied information be explored fully without engaging the body? Bringing the body into the research in ways other than through direct contact with participants provides an opportunity to address this issue. For example, Pink's (2015) sensory ethnography was drawn upon to consider the multi-sensoriality of Instagram through paying attention to the sounds, sights and feelings generated whilst using the platform.

Taking an immersive embodied approach can counter the difficulties of directly accessing embodied knowledge in research. Matthews (2021) argues that understanding of phenomena can be built through engagement with and giving attention to bodily experiences. Kurtoğlu-Hooton (2021) uses running whilst researching to bring the body into digital research, closing the gap between observation of the body through mediated representations and gaining insight into bodily experiences. I am a runner as well as a researcher, thus my body holds potential as a research tool to engage with sensory information encountered on Instagram. Echoing the findings of Kurtoğlu-

Hooton (2021), engaging in the practices of running alongside the research has created space for reflection on forms of knowledge that cannot easily be put into words. As the research continues, I will consider how information gained watching from other runners on Instagram becomes embodied through my running practices, when recalled and remembered on the run. Incorporating greater use of sensory methods to the research might enable greater access to the fleshy and feeling perspectives that digital methods sometimes render inaccessible.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the call for methodological approaches which allow flexible and adaptive approaches to research in the study of embodied information (Cox et al., 2017). Through detailed discussion and reflection on the challenges of digital ethnography, this paper offers a response to calls for deeper discussion about the methodology or methods used in information research (Carlsson et al., 2013; Griffin, 2017). Ethnographic methods including participant observation and interviewing are used to research embodied information in a digital context; however, engagement with embodied and immersive methods might support a fuller understanding of embodied information practices. This includes paying attention to the sensory aspects of digital practices such as the sensorial nature of multimedia content on Instagram. In the context of researching running, this can include incorporating active participation in the practices of running. Turning to embodied and sensory methods alongside digital methods research might enable greater access to forms of embodied information which are often difficult to capture or put into words beyond the moment of practice. This paper highlights the importance of ongoing reflection with methodological literature to address the challenges of ethnographic research. Finding ways to incorporate sensory and embodied methods into digital ethnography is a valuable strategy for overcoming the challenges of accessing embodied information in a digital fieldsite, addressing the methodological tensions of digital methods for investigating a fleshy, feeling and sensory phenomena.

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